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The Medwins of Wykeham

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"Are not you ever dull here?"—P. 55.

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Are not you ever quite here?"—P. 55.

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THE

MEDWINS OF WYKEHAM,

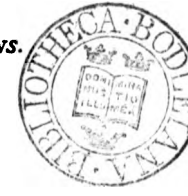
A TALE OF HOME LIFE.

BY

CHARLOTTE LANKESTER,

AUTHOR OF "MARIAN AND HER PUPILS."

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.



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THE

MEDWINS OF WYKEHAM.

CHAPTER I.

UNDER A CLOUD.

It was Saturday afternoon, holiday time for boys and girls; bright, lovely weather, as we sometimes have in the early autumn. You would have thought it the very day of all others for blackberrying, yet Margaret Medwin had refused to join her younger brothers and little sister in the excursion which she had planned so eagerly throughout the week beforehand. The children had set forth on their ramble a little disconsolately in consequence. "It was too bad," they said; "Nigel had half promised to go with them, and he was not in from school, and now Margaret wanted to get off."

Miss Weston, the daily governess, who was on

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duty that afternoon owing to Mrs. Medwin's unavoidable absence from home, was unwilling to leave her eldest pupil behind; but Margaret was firm. Her holiday was her own, to do as she liked, and she had particular reasons for staying at home.

"It is so dull without any of the big ones," pleaded little Donald, as he stood twisting the handle of his blackberry basket by the street door.

"Then ask Alick to go with you," answered Margaret, her voice dying away, as she ran up the stairs.

"It is no good asking him," muttered Donald; "besides, if he went he would only tease poor Bee all the time: we are better off without him."

So the three young ones of the family, Harry, Donald, and Beatrix, set forth with Miss Weston; and Margaret, after making a vague sort of agreement to come and meet them with Nigel, established herself in a lumber-room, from the windows of which she could see some way down the street. Full half an hour she watched, her forehead pressed close against the pane, an anxious expression on her countenance, till at last she perceived a boy coming up the street in the square cap and gown of the grammar-school. The cap was pulled down over the lad's eyes, and he walked

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moodily, swinging his satchel of books as if he had half a mind to fling them in the road and leave them there. Margaret paused a moment to make sure of the boy's identity, then turned to run down stairs and greet him as he entered. But she was not quick enough;—just as she reached the bottom of the first flight, her brother dashed into his bedroom and locked the door.

"Nigel! Nigel! let me in!" panted Margaret, tapping as she spoke; and in another moment the door was undone, and the brother and sister were together. No one would have doubted the relationship—there was the same brown wavy hair, the same bright hazel eyes with their long lashes, the same rosy, healthy complexion in each; only Nigel was much taller than his twin sister, and looked almost a year older. As Margaret came in, Nigel laid his hand on some fishing-tackle, and examined it with a would-be interested face.

"These artificial flies are not good for much," he said, grimly. "Why did not you go blackberrying, Maggie?"

"Of course I could not, without you. Oh, Nigel! why were you not home to dinner?"

"Perhaps I went fishing after school; it would not be the first time I have given up my dinner for

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the sake of a day's sport," returned Nigel, his head still bent over his box of flies.

"It was not that, I know it was not," said Margaret eagerly. "Oh! Nigel, do say you have not got into another scrape.!"

"Has Alick been telling tales of me?" asked Nigel, looking up.

"Not exactly, but you know his way; Papa of course asked where you were at dinner, and Alick said he left you at school. I guessed what was coming, and trod on his toes to make him keep quiet."

"And did he?" asked Nigel.

"Not he; he asked quite loud what I meant by kicking about in that fashion, and would have said ever so much more, only that just then Papa was wanted, and he had to finish his dinner quickly, so that there were no further inquiries."

"What a blessing!" sighed Nigel. "I don't know how it is, Maggie; it seems as if I could not keep clear of pickles. Mamma will be sorry; I promised her to go on steadily while she was out."

"She is coming home on Monday if Aunt Ellen is better," said Maggie, slowly; "but, Nigel, you have not told me what the scrape is?"

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"Only that I have been turned down again, and have no end of double work to do."

"But you have been taking such pains this week. How was it, Nigel? Is Alick before you?"

"Of course; he is head of the class, and will be a little more stuck up than usual. You know I promised Mamma before she went to Aunt Ellen's that I would turn over a new leaf, and it is not always pleasant to be crowed over by a younger brother, though I don't often distress myself about that. Well! I stuck to work like a Trojan, and yesterday I got a peg above Alick, which accounted for his bad temper. He wanted the books last night, and seemed so cross that I let him have his way for the sake of peace and quietness."

"And you played chess with me instead of preparing your lessons. I am very sorry I asked you, Nigel."

"I intended to get up early this morning, and asked Alick to call me; but I am a terribly heavy sleeper, and when I opened my eyes it only wanted half an hour to breakfast time, and I knew no more of my lessons than little Bee."

"Was Alick up?" asked Maggie

"Yes; and writing away at a tremendous rate. He said he had his theme to finish, and that if I

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had been awake there would have been such a row he could never have done it properly."

"Just like him! I don't think there ever was any one so selfish as Alick," said Margaret energetically.

Nigel laughed.

"That's always your way, Maggie. You do abuse poor Alick frightfully; he said he had no idea how late it was."

"I don't believe it," cried Maggie; "it was all a trumpery piece of spite because he could not bear the thought of your being first. Was Mr. Clarke very angry, Nigel?"

"Yes; he said it was disgraceful, and went on lauding up Alick till I got out of temper and impudent: the end of it is that I am to be reported to the Doctor."

At that moment a stern voice was heard calling Nigel from the bottom of the stairs. Margaret started.

"There's Papa, Nigel. Alick must have told him."

Nigel turned very red, and his sister added,

"Let me go; Papa will not be angry if he hears you were prevented from learning your lessons."

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"Nonsense," said Nigel, brushing past her. "You are not to say a word about it, Maggie; you had better stay here and keep clear of the mischief."

"Nigel!" again called Mr. Medwin from below; and the boy ran down stairs, Margaret following, in spite of the injunction to stop behind. Nigel found his father in the dining-room, looking grave and stern.

"Mr. Clarke has just been here making complaints of you," said Mr. Medwin. "Really, Nigel, this is positively disgraceful; you seem to think you may be as idle and as impertinent as you please. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, allowing Alick to surpass you in that way. It was the same thing last week; and now that your mamma is not at home to see that you really prepare your lessons, you do all that you can to shirk work."

"That's not true," muttered Nigel, doggedly.

"Silence!" returned his father. "What you have to do now is to make up for lost time, not to argue. What have you been doing since you left school? studying?"

"No," said Nigel, in the same constrained, obstinate voice.

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"Then go to your room, and do not let me see you again to-day, Nigel. I am disappointed in you; you make no effort to keep your promises, and when your idleness brings you into difficulties you seem perfectly careless about it. Now, go at once and get your books. Mr. Clarke says he has given you quite enough to occupy you afternoon and evening."

"Papa," said Margaret, coming forward rather unwisely, "Nigel has had no dinner."

"And does not deserve any," returned Mr. Medwin. "Margaret, you encourage him in his idleness, I am afraid. Alick said you were playing at chess with Nigel last evening."

"Alick is a tell-tale!" burst out Margaret impetuously. "Oh! Papa, if you knew——"

"Be quiet, Maggie!" cried Nigel, as he was leaving the room.

"And Maggie," continued her father, "remember I forbid you to go to Nigel's room again; he is to study alone. Why are you not of the blackberrying party?"

But Margaret was fairly in tears, and was in no state to answer him. Mr. Medwin stroked his daughter's hair with a kind gesture.

"I am not angry with you, my dear," he said, as

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he walked away, leaving poor Margaret by no means consoled with the assurance.

She sat on the hearth-rug looking very miserable, till she was roused by the entrance of Alick in search of a book.

"Have you seen my Latin dictionary, Maggie?" he asked, without appearing to notice her distress.

"No; and if I had I would not tell you," cried Margaret, springing to her feet. "Alick, it is all through you that Nigel is in trouble; you deserve to be shut up for the rest of the day instead of him."

"Who has shut Nigel up? He is home from school, is not he?" asked Alick, in a cool, provoking tone.

"Yes; but Papa has sent him to his room for the rest of the day. Mr. Clarke has been up here about him. Oh! Alick, how could you let him over-sleep himself?"

"Nigel had better be careful," returned Alick, not noticing Maggie's imputation. "Mr. Clarke talks of reporting him to Dr. Ward. It is a good thing caning is out of fashion, Maggie."

Margaret drew herself up to her full height, which, by the way, was not remarkable for a girl of fourteen. "If I stay here any longer, I

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shall be saying something I ought not. If you were only one fifteenth-part as good as Nigel, Alick, you would be very much better than you are."

"Thank you," returned Alick; "I am much obliged to you for your good opinion, sister Margaret." So saying, he opened the door for her, bowing low with mock politeness.

At five o'clock the children returned from their walk; they had been very successful in their search, and cook was persuaded into promising a blackberry pudding, a treat which little Beatrix, the three-year-old darling of the family, had never yet enjoyed.

"Where's brother?" asked little Bee, as the rest of the family gathered round the tea-table. Harry and Donald had already heard of Nigel's trouble, and were discoursing about it in a low tone in one corner of the room.

"Where's Bee's brother?" continued Beatrix in a louder key, as no one answered her question. Alick drew his chair closer to the little girl.

"You must have me for your brother to-night, Bee," he whispered: "Nigel is a naughty boy; he is not coming down to tea."

Beatrix struck at him with her little hand.

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"Bee's brother is not naughty; you 's naughty, you 's own self. Bee wants Nigel."

"Hush! Bee darling," said Margaret; "Nigel cannot come just now; you must be quiet."

"Nigel not naughty," persisted Bee, slipping down from her high chair as Mr. Medwin came in; "tell Alick so, Papa."

Mr. Medwin took the little girl up in his arms and kissed her.

"You may tell Ann to take Nigel some meat for tea, if you like, Bee; he must be hungry."

"He shall have mine blackberries," said Beatrix. "Why Nigel not coming to tea, Papa?"

"He has his lessons to do, my baby," said Mr. Medwin.

"There! Nigel not naughty!" cried the child, triumphantly. "Alick did say so. Bee will take brother her berries." And she trotted up-stairs with her basket, unmolested by any one, though Margaret looked after her with longing eyes, wishing she might follow.

"You should not try to destroy Bee's admiration of Nigel," said Mr. Medwin to Alick; "it is not worth while for her to know that he is in disgrace."

Alick made no reply, and tea proceeded more

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silently than usual. Nigel was generally the chief promoter of fun, and all missed him, except, perhaps, Alick, who sat with a book smuggled under the table-cloth, every now and then taking a peep.

Margaret, who in her mamma's absence was promoted to the post of tea-maker, was forgetful and abstracted; and finally drew forth a remonstrance from Alick for having twice forgotten to put sugar in his tea.

"On Monday Mamma will come, and then you will have it all right. What a comfort it will be to have her home again!" she said; and every one else agreed with her, mentally.

The Saturday half holiday, to the elder children at least, had not afforded its usual satisfaction, and the sense of Nigel's misdemeanours seemed to affect the whole party, as they settled quietly down to their different employments after tea. Margaret had no difficulty that evening in persuading the younger ones to obey Ann's summons promptly when she came to call them to bed; they were tired with their walk, and glad to go. Alick was the last to move; Margaret left him, still book in hand, when she went to wish her father good-night.

"You are off betimes, Maggie," said he; "you may sit up to supper if you like."

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"No, thank you, Papa, I would rather not. May I go and see Nigel before I go to bed?"

"No, Maggie; I am very much displeased with him, and I wish him to know it."

"But, Papa——" interposed Maggie.

"My dear, I am very busy; you must not talk to me now: to-morrow I will hear all you have to say. Good-night."

Margaret knew from her father's tone that nothing more was to be said, and she walked thoughtfully upstairs, pausing at her brother's door, though with the knowledge that she must not enter, and longing more than ever for her mother's return.

Mr. Medwin was a bookseller, an intelligent man, much respected by his fellow-townspeople; he was considered, too, as somewhat of an authority in various matters; was churchwarden of St. Andrews, the principal church; took a great interest in the Mechanics' Institute, which owed its flourishing condition in some measure to his exertions; and was on the Town Council, with a prospect of becoming Mayor at no very distant period. He was a kind father to his children, though the boys were rather in awe of him, for he was not very lenient to their faults. Nigel frequently came

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under his displeasure. Mr. Medwin expected a great deal from his eldest son, and Nigel's idleness and dislike of coercion often led him into trouble. Alick, on the contrary, managed to steer clear of scrapes; he was of a cooler, more calculating temperament than his brother, and when he transgressed it was never openly; he was a very clever boy, unusually so for his age, and his proficiency often provoked comparisons greatly to Nigel's disadvantage. The other children, however, one and all, were the champions of their eldest brother. Of course to Margaret he was all in all, but the younger ones too could witness to his kindness, unselfishness, and generosity; and Mrs. Medwin, while kept in constant anxiety by his heedlessness, still felt that in Nigel's case there was much more ground to work on than in Alick's.

Margaret, though she had but little sympathy with Alick, in reality resembled him more than she did Nigel in ability; but her powers were somewhat dormant, while Alick's were called forth to the utmost. In the quiet little school-room where Margaret studied with Miss Weston, there was no emulation; the lessons were often listlessly droned through, and Mrs. Medwin in her own mind wished she could devise some plan that would give her

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daughter the stimulus she needed; there were plenty of schools in Wykeham, and their merits and demerits were sometimes discussed; but Margaret and her mother had met with some rather unfavourable specimens of school-girls, and neither was willing to give up entirely the advantages of home training; besides, if the truth were known, Margaret was not very industrious, and the ordinary routine of a *demoiselle de pension* of her age did not appear at all attractive to her. Harry and Donald, two little fellows of six and eight, were also under Miss Weston's charge, and there was some talk of Beatrix being initiated into the mysteries of A B C; but it was very difficult for any one but Nigel to gain the little lady's attention for more than five minutes at a time, and Beatrix still enjoyed the full privileges of baby of the family.

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CHAPTER II.

WALKING AND TALKING.

NIGEL came down to breakfast on Sunday morning, looking as bright and sunny as if the events of the preceding day had passed into utter oblivion. The other children looked at him curiously; Harry and Donald had never yet had to incur such a lengthened punishment as spending a whole afternoon and evening in their bedroom, and they thought such a calamity must produce dire effects. They watched in silent surprise as Nigel made a "post" of himself, as he called it, for little Bee's benefit, standing against the wall while she climbed triumphantly to his shoulder, there to ruffle his hair at her own good pleasure, she in return submitting to be half smothered with kisses.

"Too much noise for Sunday morning; put Beatrix down, if you please, Nigel," said Mr. Medwin, when he came in. "You must make yourself neat, too, before we begin breakfast."

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There was a little coldness in the tone, as if the father had not forgotten past offences so easily as the son; and Nigel, somewhat abashed, hastened to do as he was told. His depression was, however, but momentary, and he busied himself preparing a marmalade sandwich, which he informed Beatrix was "of course only to be looked at," a suggestion of which the little lady did not apparently see the point, as she immediately appropriated it.

Mr. Medwin's face gradually relaxed; he had a great dislike to anything that could mar the Sunday harmony, and yet he would have been better pleased if Nigel had been rather more subdued after his punishment. In the afternoon, Margaret asked if she and Nigel might attend service at a small district church, a little way out of Wykeham; it was a favourite walk with the twins; they could not often secure such a good opportunity for private talk, and they liked the good, simple sermons they heard at the hamlet, better than the more wordy discourses of the rector of their parish church. Mr. Medwin was not disposed to encourage the project.

"I don't know, Maggie, dear," he said, in answer to her request; "I rather want you at home to

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keep Harry and Donald out of mischief when we come back from St. Andrew's."

Margaret looked disappointed; and her father, who, though strict with his boys, was disposed to let his daughters have their own way a little too much, patted her cheek, and told her she might go. The brother and sister set forth accordingly, but perhaps they had so much to say to each other that they did not know where to begin, for the first half of the walk was very silent. At last Nigel broke the restraint.

"I have been thinking, Maggie—" he said slowly.

"So have I," returned Margaret. "It was rather selfish of us to walk off by ourselves, and to leave Papa all alone with the little ones; only I wanted so to talk to you."

"And I wanted the same thing," said Nigel. "But, Maggie, if we walk back quickly, we shall reach home nearly as soon as they do; Mr. Manby's sermons are never long."

"No, and that is one reason why I like them," said Margaret; "besides I really do not see why Alick should not take his turn in reading to the children; it is not often he has the chance."

"It is pretty certain he will not avail himself

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of it," returned Nigel, dryly. "Maggie, I am in a dilemma; I wish you would help me out of it."

"If I can. What is it, Nigel?"

"Why, I thought last night that I would resolve always to make my lessons the first consideration; that I would determine to do them the first thing after tea, and then I should be sure to be safe. The only thing against it is, that if I get above Alick he will lose his temper, and somehow it does not seem right to throw temptation in any one's way."

Margaret laughed. "Oh, Nigel! Nigel! don't pass off your laziness under a cloak of disinterestedness: of course it would be much better for you to get on; it would be a very good rule to make, if you would only keep to it."

"There's the pull," said Nigel; "resolutions seem made to be broken; mine are, at least. But, Maggie, I really am serious when I say that Alick's black looks have often prevented me from trying my utmost."

"It is a pity you are in the same form," said Maggie. "Will you get a remove at Christmas?"

Nigel whistled. "Not I! Alick may. Fancy Medwin senior in the fourth, and Medwin junior in the fifth form! It will sound well."

"I wish you would not let it be so," said Mar-

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garet, earnestly; "I would not, in your place, Nigel. Besides, it vexes Papa so."

"If only he would have let me go to sea when I was at the right age for it, I should not have been so much worry to him," replied the boy gloomily. "It would not be too late for the merchant-service now, Maggie. Yesterday when I was raging in my room I had visions of putting an end to my school troubles. I have just enough tin to take me to Portsmouth."

"Nigel! how can you talk like that! You do not mean it!" cried Maggie, tears starting to her eyes in her earnestness.

"I got over it; but it does make a fellow feel savage to be sent to his room like a baby; more especially as it was not altogether my fault."

"You ought not to let Alick get the advantage of you in the way he does," said Margaret; "you should stand up for your rights."

"If he were my own size I would thrash him," said Nigel, "once for all, and have done with it; but he is no match for me in that respect; so I must e'en take him as I find him. Alick will improve some day, I have no doubt; he will be a clever man, that's certain."

"I wonder what he will be; not a tradesman, I suppose; he has too much ambition."

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"No, he means to try for a scholarship and go to college, I think; perhaps in time he may be appointed as master to some public school; or he would rather like to be a medical man—Uncle Hesketh would push him on famously."

"And you, Nigel," said Maggie, "is it quite settled you are to be with Papa?"

"Yes," returned Nigel, making a wry face; "I suppose I ought to like it, but I certainly do not. Why could not Papa let me go to sea and be happy?"

"Do you still long for it so very much?" asked Margaret, sympathisingly.

"Yes; but don't say anything about it; one cannot have everything; and after all, Maggie, a sailor's life is not a very profitable one. If Alick goes to college it will be a great expense, even if he gain the scholarship, so I must be content to stay at home."

"It is a shame you should be sacrificed," began Maggie; "but oh! Nigel, what should I do without you? I cannot help being glad to think that I shall always have you at home."

"Don't make too sure of that," said her brother; and just then they entered the little churchyard, and nothing more could be said.

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When they left it again, the old topics of conversation were not renewed. In their desire to reach home betimes, serious talk was set aside; they chatted about their mamma's return, about their aunt's illness, which, children as they were, they had but little power to realize: from that they diverged to reminiscences of a visit to London, and to a discussion of the charms of their cousin Florence. Mrs. Medwin's sister, the "Aunt Ellen" already mentioned, had married a young doctor just struggling into practice. The first few years of their wedded life had been a mighty effort to make ends meet, but Mr. Hesketh was not a man to rest contented at the bottom of the ladder: his skill in some critical cases at length drew him into notice, and now he might fairly be considered as taking a good stand in his profession. Yet, in spite of his rising fortunes, he was not without his "skeleton in the closet." His wife, who amidst all the anxieties of their poorer days, was bright and active, had fallen into ill health, and Mr. Hesketh could read her symptoms but too well. They had but one child, a very lovely-looking girl, a few months older than Margaret.

Florence, at fourteen, might have been taken for

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sixteen; she was rather disposed to patronize her country cousins, and while the boys, charmed with her winning ways, were her most devoted slaves, Margaret sometimes felt herself cast into the shade by her more brilliant companion. This little annoyance Margaret was careful to keep to herself; she was not very often brought into contact with her cousin, but the preceding winter she and Nigel had spent a month with their uncle and aunt, and Florence had been very kind in planning amusement for them. She enjoyed seeing their honest admiration of sights which were to her too familiar to excite fresh interest; she liked to astonish Margaret with her narrations of London gaieties, of which, perhaps, she enjoyed rather a larger share than generally falls to a girl of her age, and Nigel's chivalrous devotion was often useful when she had nothing better to fall back upon. Florence was very fascinating, and Margaret admired her exceedingly, though the feeling of her own homeliness in comparison was sometimes painful. The thought *would* cross her mind that Florence took undue advantage of her position, and absorbed all the attention when she might have spared a little; but at the same time came remembrances of many of her cousin's pretty speeches and caressing ways, and

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Margaret chased away her suspicions as if they were treasonable.

Quick walking brought the twins home nearly as soon as the rest of the party, and Margaret, in very few minutes, had collected around her Harry, Donald, and Beatrix, to listen to one of the old favourite Bible histories.

Bee asked earnestly for "David and the tall man," as she always called the giant; and Margaret began, speaking in a low voice, so as not to disturb her father and Alick, who were reading. Nigel sat lazily in an arm-chair, with a book before him, but in reality listening to his sister.

Presently Donald asked what a sling was like.

"It is a thing to throw stones with," said Margaret; "I don't know how to explain it exactly."

"I have one, only I call mine a 'catapult,'" interposed Nigel; "it is in a drawer upstairs; I will show it to you to-morrow, Donald."

"Oh! do get it now," said Donald, "just to show us what David killed the giant with."

"No, no; you will only want to play with it: remind me on Monday after school, and then you may see it."

But Donald was pertinacious. "You might show it to us now. Do, Nigel."

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"Well, if you and Harry like, you can come upstairs with me presently, and just take a peep at it," said Nigel, good-naturedly; "but it would have been better to wait—I might have killed a giant for you on Monday."

"There are no giants now," said Harry, who prided himself on knowing a great deal. "Go on, Margaret."

So Margaret finished her story to the children's satisfaction, after which Nigel was allowed no peace till he had trudged up to his bedroom and exhibited his weapon. Donald was rather disappointed when he saw what a simple thing it was: he had imagined something much grander, but still he was delighted when Nigel told him he should try to use it the next day—a dangerous promise enough, as it was not a very safe amusement for such a little fellow, but Nigel's good nature was greater than his discretion. The sling haunted Donald's imagination all the evening, and when he was dismissed to bed he slipped quietly into his elder brother's room, opened the drawer containing the fascinating catapult, took it out, and examined it closely.

"I should like to try it just once," said the little fellow to himself; "just one little throw; I cannot do any harm." But there were no stones at hand,

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and Donald looked round for a substitute. He spied out a tiny box, which contained some very rare foreign stamps, belonging to Alick, who, in accordance with the prevailing mania, was making great exertions to fill a stamp album.

Donald balanced the little box nicely in the sling; then whirled it in the air. Away went the box, but further than poor Donald intended. The window chanced to be open, which happily saved the glass from being broken, but the box of stamps went whizzing through into the street beneath, while Donald stood, in open-mouthed fright and astonishment, rooted to the spot. What was he to do? Alick never would forgive him. The child was far too alarmed to think of confessing what had occurred. He hastily stuffed the sling back into the drawer, fled to his own room, and had half undressed himself before Ann appeared to help him. Generally Donald was in no such haste for "Bedfordshire," and Ann, who had plenty to do, gave him great praise for being so quiet. Half an hour after, when Harry joined him, Donald was still shivering with fright; but he shut his eyes very tight, and Harry, finding he did not speak, concluded his little brother was asleep.

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CHAPTER III.

POSTAGE STAMPS IN DIFFICULTIES.

MONDAY morning brought its usual round of bustle and activity; Margaret had some additional duties, which rather weighed upon her youthful inexperience. She was very anxious that all the household arrangements should be in perfect order to greet her mother's eye on her return, and went peeping into every corner, fancying she saw defects, but hardly daring to mention them, lest the servants should think she was assuming too much. She did make a feeble attempt at giving something like an easy appearance to the drawing-room, for she remembered that the straight row of stiff, chintz-covered chairs had impressed her as unusually ugly after being accustomed to Aunt Ellen's pretty rooms; but she was not very successful, and half an hour after, when she looked in again to see the effect of her embellishments, she found that Ann had restored things to their original places. "The

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best room" was not to be demeaned by any ordinary air of comfort, and Margaret felt rebuked. Nigel, too, had his share of anxiety; he marched off to school with secret misgivings, which he would not have made known on any account. It was a very terrible thing in the eyes of Wykeham Grammar boys to be reported to the head-master, and Nigel, though his lessons that day were well prepared, did not look forward with pleasure to the morning's work. After all it was not so bad as he had expected. Dr. Ward possessed great insight into the characters of the lads around him, and he dismissed Nigel with a few words more calculated to stir him up to emulation than to stamp him as one of the hopelessly idle. The excitement of a game of cricket after school did not make Nigel forget his promise to his little brother, and he left the playground a few minutes earlier than usual on Donald's account. He found the children just coming in from their walk with Miss Weston, and he wondered that Donald did not at once spring forward and claim the promised amusement.

"Come, Don," he said, "I want to see if you can kill a sparrow in the yard with the catapult." But Donald hung back, putting his fingers in his mouth and looking ready to cry.

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"Why, what is the matter, old fellow?" said Nigel, kindly. "Has not he been a good boy, Miss Weston?"

"I don't think he is quite well," was the reply; "he has been rather fretful all the morning."

"He looks pale," said Margaret, with some anxiety, as if she were responsible during her mother's absence. "I hope he is not going to have measles, or anything."

"Measles, nonsense!" returned Nigel. "Here, Donald, come with me, and don't listen to any such rubbish—come along; it is much better fun to shy at sparrows than it is to have measles."

Nigel walked upstairs to get his catapult, still leading Donald by the hand. When they reached the bed-room Nigel opened his drawer, exclaiming, "How this thing is squeezed in, to be sure! I did not put it up like that. Have you been at it Donald?"

The tears gathered slowly in Donald's eyes, though he made great efforts to restrain them. "I did not mean to do any harm," he stammered.

"Why, you silly child," said Nigel, "I am not angry with you; see, it is not hurt, only you know you should not touch brother's things without leave. There, don't cry about it." As he spoke

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he sat down on a chair by the window, took Donald on his knee, and tried to wipe the tears away with more tenderness than you would have given such a great, rough schoolboy credit for. Donald rested his head on Nigel's shoulder, and whispered, "Don't tell, Nigel; it is quite a secret. I shall be so frightened if you tell. I threw Alick's little box out of the window."

"Out of the window! What box?" asked Nigel, in astonishment.

"The little box Mamma brought him from Tunbridge Wells; the box with the picture of the Queen's face upon it."

"My goodness!" ejaculated Nigel; "it had his best stamps in it. What did you do it for? He will be tremendously savage, I can tell you, Donald."

"Oh, don't tell him," cried the poor child, pressing closer to his brother.

"I must go and look in the street for it," returned Nigel, putting the little boy down. "When did you throw it out, Donald?"

"Last night, just before I went to bed," said Donald. "I wanted to try the sling. Please promise you won't tell Alick."

"All right; you shan't come to any harm: but,

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Don, you must never touch our things again unless we are with you. I am afraid there is not a chance of finding the box; it must have been picked up long ago. Do you know, I think the best thing you can do is to tell Alick; I will take care he does not hurt you."

"Oh! I dare not, I dare not!" persisted Donald, who had always been a timid, delicate child, and who had very little moral courage.

"It will be the best way," said Nigel; but as he noticed the tears fast gathering again, he added, "Well, never mind, I will make inquiries about the box; perhaps it may turn up again before Alick misses it."

Donald looked much relieved, and went down to dinner—with red eyes indeed, but happy in the thought that he had placed the matter in Nigel's hands and was under his protection.

"It will be best not to say anything about it to any one else," thought Nigel to himself; "some one we know may have picked it up; and if I can get it back without any fuss, so much the better," so he refrained from mentioning the matter even to Margaret.

All dinner time Nigel pondered the matter over, and when the meal came to an end he was still

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undecided how to act. If he made inquiries they were sure to come to Alick's ears; and yet the longer he deferred his investigations the less chance he would have of success. "If that little coward Donald would only let me tell him," thought Nigel to himself—but he had promised, and Nigel's promises were to be depended on, except when lessons were concerned. He could not help allowing that it was a very great loss, and one that Alick could not be expected to bear with equanimity. Whatever Alick undertook was done well, and he intended that his collection of stamps should be the best in the school, not to say in Wykeham. He had earned those which Donald had so carelessly thrown away by really hard work, of a not very honest description. He had for some time past written the exercises of a very lazy schoolfellow a great deal older than himself, who made quite a favour of paying these stamps in exchange, and so busy had he been with his double duties, that although the stamps had been in his possession for some days, he had not yet found time to transfer them to his album.

"Nigel," said his father, as the lad was leaving the room directly after dinner, "which of you boys will go and meet your mother to-night? The train

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comes in at half-past seven, and I shall not be able to leave business, I'm afraid."

"I'll go," said Nigel, "and be delighted."

"Will your lessons be prepared? You want more time for them than Alick, generally."

"Oh, let me go!" said Alick; "I shall be sure to get my work done."

"Very well," returned Nigel, his face clouding a little; "perhaps it will be safest." And off he went to begin his search, but he could only look carefully in the gutters each side of the street, thinking it might possibly lie there unnoticed by the passers-by. It was a forlorn hope; and, provoked at his want of success, Nigel strode on to the playground, where two or three big boys were standing in earnest conclave under a large elm-tree. Nigel had the respect common to the juniors for Sixth-form boys, and he perceived the chief speaker was the bully of the school, so he did not venture to join the group. As he passed by them, however, he saw that they were comparing stamps, and involuntarily he drew nearer.

"I got them from a boy that cleans our boots and knives," said Grinwood, the bully before mentioned; "he said he picked them up in the street, box and all. I believe he stole them, knowing I

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was making a collection. I gave him a shilling for the lot."

Nigel's face flushed all over with surprise and delight; he longed to claim what he felt must be indeed his brother's missing treasure, but on second thoughts he felt that now its recovery was almost more hopeless than before.

"May I see?" he said, edging himself in.

"See; yes, of course you may; and you may tell that impudent young beggar Medwin junior that he is not the only fellow who can boast a 'Pony Express over the Rocky Mountains,'" returned Grinwood; "it will take down his lordship's conceit a little."

"I beg your pardon, Grinwood," said Nigel, "but those stamps were in a little box, were they not?"

"Little pitchers have long ears," quoted another boy sententiously; "he has been listening to what you have been saying, Grinwood, and then tells it to us as news."

"Because Alick has lost a little Tunbridge ware box with stamps in, and I think this must be the very same," said Nigel, making a courageous effort.

"A likely tale," laughed Grinwood. "Go and tell that to the marines. Look here, Medwin, if

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you come telling any of your abominable stories here, you shall have such a thrashing that you won't get over it in a hurry."

"But it is not a story," persisted Nigel, still undaunted.

Grinwood threatened him with his fist, but one of the other boys put his hand on the bully's arm.

"No, no; fair play! Just tell us what stamps there were in the box, Medwin?"

That was beyond Nigel's power to do, and Burgess, who had interfered in his behalf, content with this scanty show of justice, coolly told him to be off, and not to attempt to interfere with what did not concern him. Poor Nigel, thoroughly baffled, retreated to the other end of the playground, and as a last resource kept close to Alick's side to prevent, if possible, any mention of stamps in his brother's presence. To Nigel's horror, Mr. Medwin introduced the subject that evening at tea-time.

"Young Mr. Joscelyn from the Hall came in this afternoon to order a stamp album," he said. "I told him you had a very good collection, and he said he should like to see it; so, Alick, perhaps you will put yours where I can find it if it is wanted."

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"Very well," said Alick; "don't show it though till I have made some additions; I have some rarities which are not put in yet."

"Oh! by the bye, Alick," said Nigel, as carelessly as he could, "what new stamps have you had lately?"

"Two Brazilian of different kinds, a Spanish, two Greek, one of New California—that is very valuable—and a Russian," replied Alick; "if they were heavier they would be worth their weight in gold."

Nigel mentally repeated over the list, and then tried to turn the subject into another channel, but Alick was not so easily diverted from his hobby.

"I will put them in directly after tea, and then they will be ready, Papa," he said.

"I thought you were going down to the train?" interposed Nigel.

"Well, what of that?" returned his brother; "there's plenty of time."

"Yes, if you mean to be studying when Mamma gets home," continued Nigel. "If I were you, I'd despatch the work first."

"Excellent advice," retorted Alick, dryly; "it's a pity you don't always practise what you preach."

Nigel was at his wit's end, and little Donald

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was looking at him with terrified eyes, trying to make signs of silence, which it would have been fatal for him to notice. He finished his tea as quickly as possible, seized on his trencher, and was hurrying away when his father stopped him.

"Where are you going, Nigel?" he asked.

"Only to speak to a fellow about something; I shall be back directly."

"I hope you will, my boy," continued Mr. Medwin; "I thought you intended to be very industrious this week."

Nigel rushed out, banging the door rather impatiently, and his father was annoyed at his manner. The boy did not wish to be impertinent, but he was bent on his purpose, and any hindrance irritated him. He walked quickly down the street to Grinwood's house, and rapped at the door before he had half determined what to say.

"Is Mr. Charles Grinwood at home?" he asked of the maid who answered his summons. She replied in the affirmative, and he was ushered into a small study, where he found Mr. Charles extended on a sofa smoking, with his books round him in dire confusion. Grinwood sprang up as he entered.

"Halloo, youngster! What brings you here?

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Have you come for the thrashing I promised you?"

"Not exactly," returned Nigel, quietly; "I have come for Alick's stamps. If you will give them to me you may throw in the thrashing with them, if it would be any gratification to you; I dare say I shall survive it."

Grinwood looked amused at the boy's coolness, and said, "You don't suppose I am going to give up those stamps quite so easily! I am not so young as you think me, Master Medwin."

"Look here," said Nigel; "Burgess and Walters both heard you say that the box of stamps had been picked up. Now I can prove that Alick lost that very same box, with the very same stamps in it, yesterday evening. They were pitched out of the window by mistake, and your 'buttons boy,' or whatever he is, found them. If you don't give them up, Grinwood, I will set the whole tale afloat in the school, and it won't do you much good."

This was a very bold stroke. Nigel knew that to carry his threat into effect would expose both himself and his brother to endless persecution, and he hoped with all his heart that he should be reduced to no such extremity. Grinwood, on the other hand, felt taken aback, and in somewhat of

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a dilemma. Bully as he was acknowledged to be, it would not do to let such a dishonourable action be known in the school. He did not really care much about the stamps, but he could sell them, and they had their marketable value in his eyes.

"Listen to me, Medwin," said he, striking his fist upon the table; "you are no match for me: I can make you, and your brother too, as miserable as possible, if I choose, and I think it is very likely that I may do so. Things are come to a pretty pass, when the Fourth-form thinks it can dictate to the Sixth. You shall not have the stamps unless you pay for them."

Nigel felt it was his only chance: the contest was by no means a fair one, and the younger boy was compelled to yield.

"What will you take for them?" he asked.

"Twelve shillings for the lot. They are good ones."

"I have not that money to give," said Nigel, sturdily. "Suppose we say five?"

Mr. Grinwood rose, opened the door, placed a firm hand on Nigel's shoulder, and said, with emphasis, "There's the door, my boy; we will square our accounts to-morrow: prepare for a

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tolerable amount of bruises, and give your august brother notice of the same."

"Eight shillings, Grinwood!" cried Nigel in desperation.

"You may go, my friend," returned that gentleman, throwing himself back on his sofa. "I don't reduce my prices."

"Well," said Nigel, "it is a shameful thing; but I have made up my mind to get the stamps, and I will. If I give you ten shillings, you must let me have them; it is all I possess."

"Literally all? Every brass farthing?" said his persecutor.

"Literally all," replied Nigel; and he put his hand in his pocket, took out his purse, and shook out one solitary golden coin.

"Well, I won't be extortionate," said Grinwood, rising once more; "you may have them for ten shillings, though it is only out of consideration for your tender years that I let you off so cheaply."

He took the box from his desk and passed it to Nigel, who examined it carefully to see that its contents were all safe, and in return put the half-sovereign into Grinwood's ready hand, and wished him "Good evening."

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"Stop!" said Grinwood; "you are a plucky little fellow; won't you have a cigar?"

"No, thank you," answered Nigel.

"It would make you ill, eh? Well, good night. Remember, this little piece of business is between ourselves."

"Yes," said Nigel. "Honour amongst thieves; not that I count myself amongst the number, though."

Grinwood laughed, and opened the door for Nigel, who ran off home, clasping the dearly-bought box of stamps close in his hand. He met Alick in the hall as he entered, and was immediately assailed with a shower of questions—

"Have you seen my stamp-box? It was on the table in our room, and it has disappeared. Have you done anything with it?"

"It was there yesterday, I know," said Nigel, thankful that the dim light prevented his brother from reading his countenance. "Have you looked well on the floor, Alick?"

"Yes; it is not there. I have asked every one in the house but Donald, and he has hidden himself up somewhere. I believe he knows something about it."

"Perhaps he is going to set up an opposition

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album," said Nigel, standing with one foot on the stairs, the other half over the bannister. "Now, Alick, what is the matter? Don't excite yourself," he continued, as his brother seized his arm, nearly throwing him down in his unsteady position.

"You know where it is!" cried Alick. "Why don't you tell me? What a plague you are, Nigel!"

"You'll be too late for the train;—leave go!" said Nigel, shaking him off. "Here, wait a minute," he added, as Alick was moving towards the hall-door, grumbling as he went; "my eyes are better than yours. I have no doubt I shall find it."

He strode quickly upstairs as he spoke, pretended to search, and in a few seconds the stamp-box tumbled down on Alick's square cap, as he stood waiting in the hall beneath.

"Next time," said Nigel, as he leant over the rail above—"next time, Alick, you had better look properly for things before you make such a fuss."

"Where was it?" asked Alick.

"Just where you did not look, of course. Be off with you! The train will be in before you reach the station."

Away went Alick; and Nigel settled to his

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lessons, laughing in his sleeve at the *ruse* he had played upon his brother, which compensated momentarily for the loss of his half-sovereign. Well for Nigel that the train was late that evening; as it was, he had but half done his work when the cab drove up to the door. In a moment he and Margaret, closely followed by their father, were in the hall, welcoming with warm, loving greetings the mother of the family, whose return had been so eagerly looked for. Mrs. Medwin had been absent a fortnight;—to the children the time seemed much longer, and they crowded round her, eager to tell all that had happened since they were last together. She was soon established comfortably in the dining-room, where Margaret superintended with careful eye the brewing of the cup of tea which was to be so specially good, while Harry, under Nigel's direction, made toast, sure to be superior to any of cook's manufacture. In the bustle and excitement, it had not at first been noticed that Donald was absent from the party. Mamma's quick eye soon perceived that one of her flock was missing, and she inquired what had become of her little boy.

"Donald!" said Alick. "Why, where is he? He disappeared when I was hunting for my stamps. Have you not seen him since, Margaret?"

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But Margaret had been so busy preparing for her mother's arrival, that she had given no heed to Donald's manœuvres, and now she looked up in perplexity, hardly comprehending the question.

"I'll find him," said Nigel; and he started up, leaving Harry to finish the toast. He waited a minute at the door to ask Beatrix if Donald were in the nursery, but the little girl shook her head; and Nigel made the tour of the house, peeping under all the beds and looking in every direction, but quite unable to find his brother. As Nigel still delayed his return to the dining-room, Mrs. Medwin came out, beginning to feel rather uneasy, and soon the whole family were calling Donald's name all over the house. Some one was just suggesting that he might have run out of doors, when Nigel popped his head into a closet containing brooms, blacking-brushes, &c.; it was next the staircase, a dark, dreary-looking place, where he thought Donald would hardly dare to venture. At the end of this closet was a smaller one which went quite underneath the staircase, and which was used as a receptacle for old boxes, and there, curled up in a corner, lay the little fellow fast asleep. Nigel shaded his candle carefully with his hand, and touched his brother gently. The child rubbed his eves, and

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looked round sleepily; but Nigel lifted him out almost before he had time to realize where he was.

"It is all right, Donald," he said; "the box is found. Mamma is come home and wants to see you. Come upstairs, and let me make you a clean boy before you go to her."

Little bewildered Donald allowed himself to be carried off to Nigel's bedroom, where his kind brother washed, brushed, and comforted him, and then took him to his mother, begging her and every one else privately to take no notice of his funny freak. Alick thought his previous suspicions were confirmed, but he could not accuse Donald of having injured any of his property; and the rest of the evening passed off very harmoniously.

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CHAPTER IV.

AUNT JANE.

"MARGARET," said Mrs. Medwin, coming into her daughter's bedroom the morning after her return home, "why are you not in the schoolroom? Miss Weston has been here some minutes."

Margaret rose from her chair, threw down the book she had been reading, and went up to her mother.

"May I have a holiday this morning, Mamma, just to help you unpack? There is so much I want to hear about Florence that you can't tell me when we are all together."

"We shall find plenty of opportunities for talking, I hope, Maggie dear; but you must not stay now; you should not keep Miss Weston waiting. I hope you were not so unpunctual while I was away."

Margaret blushed a little, and ran off to avoid answering the question, which she felt could not

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be done very satisfactorily. Mrs. Medwin took up the volume her daughter had been reading, and placed it on the book-shelf with rather a grave countenance.

"It is too early in the day to be devouring story-books," she thought; "I am afraid Margaret does but little for herself in the way of self-discipline."

Her fears would have been confirmed if she could have seen Margaret turning listlessly over her lessons, while Miss Weston looked grieved, finding how very little she had prepared.

Margaret did not think, when she planned so ingeniously how to get through as little work as possible, that her younger brothers were unconsciously acquiring the same habit, and she was quite shocked when Harry brought up an addition sum to be looked at, full of mistakes, but with the proof-line carefully copied from the upper one, in the vain hope that Miss Weston would not go through it.

"You naughty boy!" said Margaret, taking it upon herself to administer reproof; "don't you know it is not honest to copy the figures like that?"

"I did not know I had added it up wrong,"

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returned Harry, "and I did not want the trouble of working the proof."

At a quarter to twelve the children put away their books, and Mrs. Medwin came in to ask if Margaret would join her, instead of walking with Miss Weston and the little boys.

Margaret was delighted at the idea, and was soon ready.

"Where are you going, Mamma?" she asked.

"To see Aunt Jane," was the reply; "it will be a pleasant walk, Maggie."

Maggie made a wry face. "Yes," she said, "I shall not mind going with you, Mamma; you will have your visit to talk about, so perhaps there will not be much time for advice gratis."

"I hope you went to see her while I was away," continued Mrs. Medwin.

"No, Mamma; I intended doing so, but somehow it was always put off. I think Nigel did though, which answered the same purpose."

Aunt Jane was an elder sister of Mr. Medwin, who lived a little way out of Wykeham; she was a great invalid, having for many years suffered with hip disease. With the children she was not very popular, owing to a certain want of tact, and an utter inability to sympathise with any of their plans

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of amusement, though at the same time she was very fond of them.

Margaret had no great affection for Miss Medwin's prim little parlour, and it was rather a penance to her to spend a day there. She wondered sometimes how it was that Nigel so often managed to pay his aunt a visit; she explained it to herself generally by thinking that he did not stay there very long, and that old Lucy, Miss Medwin's servant, supplied him, whenever he went, with plenty of gingerbread.

"It is quite another thing," Margaret would say, "to sit there a whole afternoon with a little bit of embroidery in one's hand, till one is ready to expire with dulness."

That morning Aunt Jane seemed to Margaret particularly acrimonious. She had thought Mrs. Medwin wrong in leaving her children for a whole fortnight, and she did not seem to consider that the visit was by no means taken solely for pleasure.

"I am glad to see you back at last," she said to Mrs. Medwin, shaking hands rather grimly.

"And I am thankful to be at home again," was the reply. "I hope you have been no worse than usual since I last saw you, Jane."

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"If I had, you would not have heard of it, I dare say," said Miss Medwin; "I have seen none of the children but Nigel, and little Beatrix, who came one day with her nurse. I don't know how Margaret fills up her time."

Mrs. Medwin tried to divert the conversation into a different channel, and Aunt Jane inquired for Mrs. Hesketh.

"She is very sadly indeed," was the reply; "we are very anxious about her."

"I am sorry to hear it. I hope Florence is less giddy than she was."

"Florence does all she can for her mother," said Mrs. Medwin; "but she is very young and inexperienced. I wish it were possible to be in two places at once."

"It is a great pity that Florence has not had a more useful education," said Aunt Jane; "she has been brought up so entirely for society, that I should think she is quite out of place in a sick room."

"She manages better than you would expect," replied Mrs. Medwin. "Florence's sweet voice and gentle movements have their own value; besides, I think she has not been educated solely for society, although that has had its effect in impart-

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ing a polish to her. You must recollect that she takes rather a different position to some—my Maggie, for instance."

"Great nonsense," grumbled Aunt Jane. "I don't see why one cousin should be a grander lady than another."

Mrs. Medwin laughed. "It is one of those things we cannot help; and after all it is but of little real importance. If Margaret is but a true gentlewoman at heart, it will not much matter if she does not move in fashionable circles."

"That involves a great deal," said Aunt Jane. "Coming to see your aunt occasionally would be an act of politeness, to say the least of it," she added, turning to Margaret, who played awkwardly with the button of her glove, not knowing what to say. "Nigel is the best among you," continued Aunt Jane; "and I had to give him a scolding last time he came about his dirty boots: he left marks all over the carpet."

"He gets into trouble about that at home sometimes," said Mrs. Medwin; "I am glad you told him of it."

"He took it very well," said Aunt Jane; "and I made him get the dust-pan and brush, and clear it all away. Lucy was quite vexed to think he should

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do such a thing; she spoils Nigel, just as she did his father before him."

Talking of Nigel restored Miss Medwin to a more agreeable view of things in general, and when her visitors rose to take their leave, she petitioned that Margaret might be left to spend the afternoon with her. Margaret looked appealingly at her mother, grew red in the face, and mumbled something about lessons; but Mamma thought Miss Weston would give her a holiday, and promised that Nigel should fetch her home to tea. Margaret's expression was disconsolate as she opened the door for her mother to go out.

"I have not even my embroidery," she whispered; and Mrs. Medwin replied in an equally low tone—

"Do what you can to amuse Aunt Jane, it will be an act of charity."

Margaret walked slowly upstairs to take off her hat and jacket; she made the operation last as long as she possibly could, and then she went round the room, making a careful inspection of all the old-fashioned ornaments and ugly family portraits, mostly silhouettes in little black frames, all of which she had studied about a hundred times before. This could not last many minutes,

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and Margaret again journeyed down to the front parlour. She was rejoiced to find old Lucy there, laying the cloth for dinner.

"Three-quarters of an hour for dinner," thought Margaret, "then Aunt Jane will take a nap, and I shall go and talk to Lucy; after that it will not be so very long before Nigel comes."

"Have you been working very hard lately, Margaret?" asked Aunt Jane, breaking in upon her meditations.

"Pretty much as usual, Aunt," returned Margaret, who had a great aversion to point-blank questions.

"Ah! I am afraid Miss Weston does not keep you up to the mark; she never struck me as a very energetic person herself."

"I don't know," said Margaret, faintly.

"Not that I am an advocate for stuffing and cramming girls, as is the fashion now-a-days," continued Aunt Jane. "Margaret, you are the eldest of a large family, and ought to make yourself useful. What can you do?"

"I don't know," again replied Margaret.

"Well, my dear, then you ought to know. Do you ever do any plain sewing?"

"I darn my own stockings," said Margaret.

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"And a very good thing, too," said Aunt Jane, approvingly. "But when I was your age, I not only did my own, but those of four brothers be sides. And I had made my father a set of shirts before I was as old as you are."

"I don't think I could manage that," said Margaret, who was not at all fond of work.

"People never know till they try, my dear. I dare say you will have to do many worse things than that," continued Aunt Jane. "I am afraid you are not of a practical turn of mind."

"Indeed I am, Aunt Jane," cried Margaret, assuming the defensive. "Papa says I shall make a capital little housekeeper."

"Well, well, my dear, I hope you may—if ever you have a house to keep, that is. Now let us eat our dinner before it gets cold." And Aunt Jane drew her chair to the table, greatly to the relief of her young visitor.

Having despatched that important business, the elder lady prepared to take a nap, and the younger one stole quietly from the room and took refuge in Lucy's department. That worthy woman was busy washing up dishes in the back kitchen, but she rubbed up a chair, which already shone like glass, and asked Margaret to sit down.

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"I shall be coming in and out, Missie dear," she said, "and we can talk between whiles."

"Are not you ever dull here, Lucy?" asked Margaret the next time the old servant entered the kitchen, with a whole pile of plates in her hand.

"Dull, Miss! No; how should I be? What with the missis to look after, and the bird, and the housework, and the cooking, I am not often dull. When I am, I rub up my dish-covers, and I soon get the better of it. They do look beautiful, don't they?" she added, looking at them with honest admiration.

"I wish you would let me rub one up for you," said Margaret.

"Why, Miss Margaret!" cried Lucy, "what a funny young lady you are! I am sure you can't think they look to want it. Do you know, Miss, I think you are right though; there is a little speck on one of them"—and she mounted on a chair, and wiped off the offending smut with her apron, and put her head first on one side and then on the other, just as I have seen artists do when enjoying the effects of their own pictures. "There, it will do now," she added. "What made you think of setting to work with whitening and wash-leather

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for, Miss Margaret? It isn't a young lady's amusement that I know of."

"You say it prevents you from feeling dull," said Margaret; "and I thought it might cure me; I feel very dull, Lucy."

"Do you, Miss? I wonder why. You have most things to make you happy. I should think, now, your aunt would have more excuse for feeling dull than you."

"Why does she always say disagreeable things to people? I wish she would not," said Margaret. "Does she talk in that way to you, Lucy?"

"Of course she does, when she has nothing else to do, or to think about, Miss Margaret. But, poor thing, why shouldn't she, if it amuses her? Her bark is a deal worse than her bite, and it's the pain she suffers that makes her speak in that way. When I remember what a pretty young lady she was, and how she is altered now, I don't mind how sharp she speaks, always provided it makes her feel happier."

"Is she always in pain?" asked Margaret.

"Almost always, my dear; more particularly when she doesn't seem so amiable—that's a sure sign. Miss Medwin has a spirit of her own, she always had, and now she won't complain; only she

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sn t what you call cheerful when the pain is bad. You should talk to her and make her forget it, Miss Margaret."

"But I don't know how," said Margaret. "She makes me feel as if I could not say anything. What does Nigel do when he is here, Lucy?"

"Master Nigel! Bless his heart! he makes her laugh more than any one does. The other day he read to her out of a book about 'Master Copperfield.' I was bringing in the tea-things, and I was forced to stop and listen, it was so entertaining like."

"Did not Aunt say it was a silly book?" asked Margaret.

"I don't know, my dear. I dare say she said so; but I don't suppose she thought it, for she is very fond of Master Nigel—a dear young gentleman he is, too. I was quite put out though, the last time he came; your aunt scolded him for coming in with dirty boots."

"Yes, I heard about that," said Margaret, laughing.

"Master Nigel said he had read in a book about some old ladies tacking bits of newspaper over the carpet, like paths to the chairs, when they had company. He thought it would be a good plan for

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your aunt—but it would not look pretty, would it, Miss?"

"Not very," said Margaret. "Well, Lucy, I suppose I must go now; Aunt will be waking up."

"Yes, Miss; and don't forget to cheer her up a bit; it isn't often she gets the treat of having you, and you are fine company;" with which diplomatic speech Lucy vanished again into the back kitchen, and Margaret returned to the parlour, resolved to do her best to rub up a figurative dish-cover.

Miss Medwin looked pale and shivery when she went in, and Margaret asked if she should get a shawl to cover over her.

"Yes, do, my dear, please; and then come and have a little talk with me."

"I saw some such pretty shawls in a shop to-day," said Margaret, as she made her aunt comfortable. "They were quite small, made of Berlin wool, and would just suit you. I know the stitch they are done with; I think I shall make you one."

"It would be a greater charity still if you would show me how to make it for myself," said Aunt Jane; "I want some new work sadly."

"If you have any wool, Aunt, I might teach you how to begin it, and then I would find out about

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the number of rows afterwards," said Margaret, rejoiced at the thought of a little employment.

"You may look in that work-table, and see what you can find," was the reply; and Margaret dived down into the recesses of that wonderful receptacle, and drew forth many treasures whose existence she had never before suspected. She found what she wanted, too, and was so busy giving her aunt instruction in the new art, that she was quite astonished when Nigel popped his head in at the door, holding his boots high above his head.

"May I come in, Aunt?" he said; "I have pulled off my boots, and dare not put them down anywhere for fear they should get into mischief."

"Put them on the mat, silly boy," said his aunt, "and come in and let me have a look at you."

"Maggie, you must be quick," said Nigel; "it is getting late. I hope she has been a good girl, Aunt Jane."

"Very good indeed; I did not know Margaret could make herself so agreeable."

Margaret winced under this equivocal compliment, and ran off to equip herself for her walk.

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When she came in again, Aunt Jane was looking quite rosy and bright under the influence of Nigel's fun. The twins wished her good-bye, and Margaret acknowledged, as they left the house, that the visit had passed off better than might have been expected.

"I cannot think why you should not be perfectly happy there," said Nigel. "Aunt Jane and I are capital friends."

"She *is* cross, though," said Margaret.

"So would you be if you had as much to bear. It does not suit you to be ill, any more than it does Aunt Jane, Maggie."

"No, I am afraid I am not very patient," said Margaret. "But do you really like going there, Nigel?"

"It is a kind of pleasure," replied her brother, thoughtfully; "not amusing exactly, to me at least, but I think it is to her. When people are ill and cannot do much, they like to see fresh faces: besides, it is a duty. You don't know what a good sister she was to Papa, Margaret; he has often told me about it; we ought to do something for her in return."

"I am not very fond of 'duty,'" said Margaret.

"And I like Aunt Jane," added Nigel. "She

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is a sensible woman, and always gives me plenty of gingerbread. See, this pocket is stuffed quite full; you shall have some for tea." With which satisfactory conclusion Margaret was perfectly content.

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CHAPTER V.

QUEEN BEE'S BIRTHDAY.

"NEXT Friday will be our baby's birthday," said Mrs. Medwin one evening, shortly after the little lady in question had departed to bed. "What do you think we had better give her, children?"

Now, it was the custom amongst the Medwins, when birthdays came round, for them all to club together, so as to make "one grand present," as they said, "instead of half a dozen trumpery ones." When that important event came off for Margaret and Nigel, there was generally a great deal of joking beforehand; they were told that no one could possibly stand such heavy drains on their purse as subscribing for two presents at once, so, to prevent jealousy, there would be none given at all. The twins were never dismayed at these threats. When the day came, their anticipations were generally surpassed, and the double fête was always kept with double honours. When Margaret

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was quite a little child, she was found one morning in great grief because Nigel had confided to her that he had contributed sixpence to *her* birthday gift, whereas she had only been able to afford fourpence for *his*. Nigel tried to console her by telling her that she might give twopence more next year, but it was a source of sorrow to the little maiden till the day arrived. Then, having received a beautiful new shilling from Aunt Jane, she immediately had it converted into copper coin, and presented two penny-pieces to her brother, saying, "There, Nigel; now you will know I love you as much as you do me."

The children were all very anxious to give due honour to little Bee's fourth birthday, and the discussion of her present was taken up with great interest.

"A new doll," suggested Margaret.

"Dolls are nonsense," said Nigel; "besides, Bee has about half a hundred already, with their eyes out and their noses broken. Why don't you buy her a rocking-horse? Harry and Donald would enjoy that too."

"Too expensive," said Mamma. "Neither can we have a doll, because there will not be time to dress it properly. What would you like to give

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Bee, Donnie?" she added, turning to the little boy at her side, busy cutting out pictures for a scrap-book.

"I would like to buy her a bagful of those pretty marbles we saw in a shop," replied Donald. "Oh! Mamma, do let us buy her those."

"I wonder who would play with them, Beatrix or Donald," said Alick. "That's one word for Bee and two for yourself."

"I—I—I, I am sure it is not!" stammered Donald, who always did stammer when he was excited. "You are very unkind to say so, Alick."

"Then if we give Bee the marbles, you will promise never to play with them," continued Alick, who was an adept in the art of teasing.

Donald looked very doleful. "Mamma, I may play with them sometimes, may I not?"

"No, certainly not," persisted Alick.

"Alick, be quiet; and, Donald, don't be such a baby," said Mrs. Medwin, as the little boy began to show unmistakeable signs of crying. "Marbles will not do," she added; "you must think of something else."

"Marbles are very charming, and I have no doubt Bee would like them," said Alick; "but

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then Donald would cry for them, which would be very uncomfortable."

Donald burst out into a roar, making a great deal more noise than was necessary, and his mother looked distressed.

"Donald, you had better go to bed, I think," she said; "you must be very tired to cry so easily."

Donald made a mighty effort, opened his eyes very wide indeed to prevent the tears from falling, and swallowed one which had made a briny pathway down his cheek, and had stopped at the corner of his mouth.

"Suppose you run upstairs, little man," continued Mrs. Medwin, "and ask Ann to find me some coarse cotton;" and Donald was glad of the errand, in order to recover the shock to his wounded feelings.

"Alick, I am going to take the first opportunity of boxing your ears," said Nigel.

"Alick, I really wish you would not torment the little ones," said Mr. Medwin; "you know how easily Donald is upset. I cannot think what amusement you find in making him unhappy."

"Poor little dear," said Alick, "he made a great mistake in being a boy."

"When he comes back do not say anything more

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to him," said Mamma, and just then the little boy entered, looking rather shame-faced, and seating himself as far from Alick as possible.

Harry, who during all this time had preserved a solemn countenance, now broke silence.

"I have thought of something," he said, "which Bee would like, and which would be very useful to her when she has a party. Will she have a party on her birthday, Mamma?"

"Yes, I think she may have a few little folks to spend the afternoon with her; that is the great delight of a birthday to Bee," said Mrs. Medwin. "What is your idea, Harry?"

"Little tea-things," said Harry; "little china tea-things that she could make real tea in."

"Bravo, Harry; Solomon himself could not have spoken more wisely," cried Nigel, clapping his brother on the back.

"Little tea-things, by all means," echoed Margaret, and "little tea-things" carried the day, though Alick brought before the public an alarming statement of the number of cups of drab-coloured mixture which each member of the family would be expected to partake of. The next thing to be considered was the money to purchase. Of course Mamma and Papa gave the large sums, and

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the children added thereto in proportion to their means.

So Margaret produced eighteen-pence, Alick a shilling, the two younger boys sixpence each, and Nigel fumbled in both pockets, took out a large and respectable-looking green morocco purse, opened it, and shook out one farthing with a hole in it. He handed this to his mother, saying pathetically—

> "'I give thee all, I can no more,
> Though poor the offering be.'"

"My dear Nigel," said Mrs. Medwin, laughing, "you are not really reduced to such extremities, I hope."

"He has half-a-sovereign stowed away somewhere," said Alick. "It is a genteel way of saying he does not wish to contribute."

"What have you done with your money?" asked Margaret, anxiously. She generally knew the exact state of Nigel's funds, and felt quite in alarm that ten shillings could be expended without her knowledge.

Nigel shook his head. "It's a sad case," he said; "I wish I might have a birthday, Mamma; there would be some chance of having my coffers replenished. That very farthing I picked up in

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the playground yesterday, and could not find an owner for."

"I am like Margaret," said Mrs. Medwin. "I ask, what have you done with your money?"

"Spent it," answered Nigel, laconically. "No, mother dear," he added, as Mrs. Medwin looked displeased, "I am very sorry I cannot tell you how, but the money is gone, and there's an end of it."

"I hope it has not been spent foolishly," said Mrs. Medwin. "Have you anything to show for it, Nigel?"

"It has been spent foolishly, and I have nothing whatever to show for it," said Nigel. "Now I have made that confession, I hope every one will be so kind as to ask no more questions, for I really cannot answer them."

There was a dead silence. It was evident to all that there was some great mystery in Nigel's proceedings. Harry and Donald, to whom ten shillings seemed a perfect mine of wealth, looked at each other in horrified amazement. Alick bethought himself of schoolboy bets, and wondered that Nigel had not more sense than to keep clear of such folly. Mrs. Medwin was grieved that her boy had begun keeping secrets from her; she felt

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as if it were the first swerving from the confidence that had hitherto existed between mother and son. His manner, too, had not been respectful, and she resolved to seek in private some explanation of his behaviour.

Margaret alone, in her heart of hearts, exonerated Nigel from all blame; he had either given the money away, or lost it unfairly, she thought; but she, too, was grieved that her brother did not think fit to tell her everything.

Mr. Medwin noticed the quietude of the little party when he joined them after business; and later in the evening, when the children had, one by one, wished him good-night, he inquired what was the matter with Nigel. He was much annoyed when he heard Mrs. Medwin's account, and asserted his intention of inquiring more fully into the affair the next day.

Nigel meantime had gone upstairs in no very comfortable frame of mind. He felt that his mother had a right to ask for an explanation, which he was very loth to give; and he listened eagerly, hoping to hear his father leave the dining-room, and go, as he sometimes did after supper, to his counting-house.

Alick asked several times impatiently why Nigel

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did not undress, and grumbled at the candle being alight so long, but his brother vouchsafed no reply, and stood with the door ajar, ready to run down stairs as soon as the opportunity presented itself. At last he thought he heard footsteps in the hall, and, without further delay, he walked boldly into the dining-room. He was mistaken in his supposition, for there sat his father just where he had left him, but looking much sterner than when he had wished him good-night a few minutes before. Nigel would fain have retreated, but there was no help for it, and he came forward, provoked with himself for the loudly beating heart and unsteady voice which proved to him how nervous he was.

"Well, Nigel," said his mother, in her usual gentle voice, "what have you come to tell us?"

"I came to speak about the money, Mamma," said Nigel, speaking rapidly and with downcast eyes. "I am very sorry I cannot tell you how I spent it, because I am under a kind of promise not to do so, but I do not think you would say there was anything wrong."

"You see, Nigel," said Mr. Medwin, "I really cannot afford to have you wasting money. I like you to have an allowance, even though it is but a small one, but you must learn to make a good

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use of it. Now, you admit that your half-sovereign was spent foolishly, and that you have nothing to show for it; so, since you are not fit to be entrusted with money, the only thing I can think of is to give you less to spend."

"But, Papa," said Nigel, eagerly, "I could not exactly help myself. I certainly did not make a profitable investment, but still you would not really disapprove of what I have done."

"Not even call you extravagant?" asked Mr. Medwin.

Nigel was very honest; even to get himself out of a scrape he would not diverge from the exact truth, and he replied, "You would not call it extravagance, but still you would say it was money thrown away. I will try to be more careful next time, Papa."

"I hope you will, or most certainly your allowance will be stopped."

"Good-night," said Nigel, moving towards the door.

"Here, stop one minute," said his father; "you need not be in such a hurry, my boy. I am going to make a weak concession, because I think you have spoken honestly and bravely. Here is your next month's money in advance, on the condition

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that you take good care of it, and do not make any more mysteries."

Nigel looked very much astonished. "Are you sure you can trust me?" he said, looking from father to mother with questioning glance.

"I am sure I can," was his mother's warm reply.

"And I think I will risk it," said Mr. Medwin, laughing. "Still, if you think it unadvisable, Nigel, I will take the money back."

Nigel put one hand over his treasure, and held out the other to his father. "Thank you," he said; and his earnest eyes expressed more than his words.

"That's a fine fellow," said Mr. Medwin, as Nigel once more closed the door behind him. "A fine, manly fellow; with all his scrapes, he seems to have a sort of right principle at the bottom, which will keep him from going very far wrong."

"I hope so. I am sure that though he says but little, he seeks to do the thing that is right. His perfect sincerity is a great safeguard to him," replied Nigel's mother.

Little Bee was full of excitement on the eve of her birthday; she had talked of nothing else from

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morning to night, and went to bed half an hour earlier than usual, thinking the happy day would then come sooner than usual. Neither she nor her nursemaid overslept themselves the next morning. At half-past four, when it was still quite dark, Beatrix awoke, stood upright in her little bed, rubbed her sleepy eyes, and, unable to rest quiet, called Ann, to ask if her birthday had come. Poor Ann, disturbed in the midst of a delightful dream, was thankful that birthdays came but once a year, and tried to persuade her little charge to go to sleep again. Beatrix had a few ideas about birthday behaviours, as well as birthday pleasures, and she tried very hard to lie still for nearly an hour; then she begged very earnestly to be allowed to go to Margaret's room, to tell her that she was really and truly four years old. Ann told her that Miss Margaret would not be at all pleased to see her so early; but Queen Bee, as usual, carried her point, and soon after, a funny little figure in blue flannel dressing-gown and slippers crept into Margaret's bed.

"Maggie, Maggie," said Bee, patting her sleepy sister's cheek, "my birthday has come,—it really has, and I am so *velly* old."

"Ah! what?" returned Margaret, in a sleepy

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tone. "It's the middle of the night, Bee. What do you want?"

"It is not night; it's my birthday," said sturdy little Bee. "Wake up, lazy Maggie," and she tried to pull up her sister's drowsy eyelids in a most cruel manner.

Margaret saw there was nothing to be done but to submit to circumstances, so she allowed the little lady to creep in beside her.

"Do you think I shall have a present?" whispered Beatrix. "Oh! I know what I should like."

"What would you like?" asked Margaret.

"A laminator" (*Anglicè*, perambulator) "for my doll," said little Bee, earnestly. "Oh! I should like a laminator."

Margaret could not encourage false hopes, so she diverted her sister's ideas by offering to tell her a story. She related the dreadful history of "The Silver Arm," which Bee had already heard many times before, and which was an especial favourite; and when that was finished, Bee offered to tell one in her turn. It was a very interesting narrative, all about a little girl that had a doll with blue eyes and flaxen hair, and who had a birthday. The story was a very long one, full of "ands" and "so's," and it wandered so much from the original

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text that I should find it very difficult to write it down. Margaret had a most refreshing nap in the middle of it, and Bee herself fell asleep before it had come to a satisfactory conclusion. At half-past seven, Ann came to dress the little girl, and then her ecstasies began again. She hardly knew how to keep still in her impatience to visit Papa, Mamma, and Nigel.

Poor little Beatrix! She made great efforts not to ask publicly about her present, but she could not help peering about in every direction, hoping to spy out some parcel that looked as if it might belong to her.

It was the Michaelmas holidays, and the boys had nothing better to do than to join in the birthday fun; so after breakfast Nigel slipped out of the room, and gave a hard pull at the door-bell, rapping loudly at the same time. Presently, in came the servant with a large, heavy box, directed to "Miss Beatrix Medwin."

Bee, who was sitting on Papa's knee, enjoying a little extra petting, sprang down with a scream of delight, and was soon struggling with all the strength of her tiny fingers to undo the cord.

"Wait a minute, little chick," said her father; "you want a little help. Run, Harry, and find me

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a bradawl—these knots are very tight. See, the box is nailed down one side; we shall need the hammer and chisel too."

Soon the lid was raised, and little Bee wondered to see what looked like a box of hay. "I don't want hay," she said, her eyes filling with tears in her disappointment. "Horses eat hay, not little girls."

"Look underneath," said Mamma, taking away some superfluous litter as she spoke.

The smiles came back as the little girl put her hand upon something smooth and shiny. "A tea-pot!" she cried, as it was held up to view. "Oh, how beautiful! And a sugar basin, and little cups! Oh! Mamma, are they all for me? Oh! how happy I am!" And Bee seated herself on the table, with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes, almost unable to speak for joy, as plates and saucers were drawn from their hiding-place.

"And, Bee," said Margaret, "you shall make tea in them to-night."

"When I have my party?" asked Beatrix, almost incredulous. "And will you drink some of my tea, Papa? I shall say, 'Will you take sugar and milk?' And then I will put all into my tea-pot, and then I will pour it into the cups."

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Everybody laughed at Bee's original fashion of making tea, and for some time the little girl amused herself with admiring her new possessions, till she was summoned to go for her walk.

Margaret volunteered to take her to see Aunt Jane, and Nigel persuaded Alick to help him in some preparations he was making for the amusement of the little children who were coming in the afternoon. Very busy were the boys, locked up in their bedroom the greater part of the morning. Once they came out to have a consultation with Mamma, and to collect some materials for their employment. They carried off, amongst other things, a stuffed bird, of the duck species, which generally stood under a glass case in the hall; and Harry and Donald, who were on the alert for discoveries, persisted in inquiring at dinner-time what had become of the said duck, till they were effectually silenced by a frown from Alick, of which they did not dare to provoke a repetition.

At four o'clock, ten little boys and girls, besides the Medwin children, were all at play in the large nursery, which had been cleared out for them. Beatrix had resolved that her new tea-things should be a surprise to her visitors when tea-time came, but she found the burden of her secret so oppres-

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sive, that she took her friends apart, one by one, and told them of the delight in store, and, having thus relieved her mind, she played much more happily.

The children thought the tea-table looked beautiful when they descended once more to the dining-room. In the middle stood a large birthday cake, covered with sugar, and with an ornament in the centre; and I think the little boys admired this even more than they did the new tea-service, over which Beatrix, with Margaret as aide-de-camp, presided very solemnly.

Presently the little lady slipped down from her high chair, ran up to her Mamma, and whispered something in her ear.

"What is it, my darling? I cannot understand you," said Mrs. Medwin.

"Might I take one of my cups of tea to Mr. Myers in the shop?" whispered Beatrix. "I should so like."

Mrs. Medwin laughed and gave her assent, and the little maiden, with slow, careful footsteps, carried a tiny cup and saucer, with sugar *ad libitum*, and a sweet biscuit in addition, to the shop door. She peeped in, and spied out Mr. Myers busy tying up parcels.

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"This is for you to drink," said Bee, holding out the cup as she stood on the door-step.

Mr. Myers came round directly. "Thank you, little Missie," he said. "Did I not hear it was your birthday?"

"Yes," said Beatrix; "and I have a party."

"I think I have a little parcel in my pocket," said Mr. Myers. "Would you like to see it?"

"I like parcels," replied Beatrix; and Mr. Myers accordingly produced his. Bee pulled off the white wrapper, and found an oblong tin box full of barley-sugar. She was in such glee, that she ran off at once to the dining-room with her prize, quite forgetting to say "Thank you," or to wait for her cup.

Such games there were after tea—blind man's buff, hunt the slipper, and all sorts of fun. At seven o'clock, the children went into the drawing-room, where they were told something very remarkable was to be seen. At the door stood Alick, ready to receive the little ones.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "allow me to introduce to you Mother Goose and her wonderful bird, who, knowing it was Michaelmas time, have flown down from the sky, to present the company with golden eggs."

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A wonderful goose it was truly. Donald immediately called out, "Why, that's our Muscovy duck! How did it get out of its glass case?"

Mother Goose shook her head at this, and in a gruff voice said, "There will be no eggs for little boys who make remarks."

Some of the younger children looked frightened, and squeezed nearer the door, but the old woman, clad in mob cap and scarlet cloak, with a very long nose, hobbled up to Beatrix, and asked if she would look in the nest.

Bee stared very hard. "She talks just like brother Nigel," she said, in a low voice; and then she allowed herself to be led up to the large nest, made of the identical hay unpacked that morning. If geese were only in the habit of building such nests oftener, how pleasant it would be! This one was full of penny toys, balls, Dutch dolls—so many pretty things that each child had a good supply, while Mother Goose showed wonderful discrimination in awarding the gifts. It was the *finale* of the day's amusement, for nurses began to arrive, and with them came that ever-memorable person, the dustman, who, from time immemorial, has been so unkind in affecting the eyesight of little folk at a certain time in the evening. Even happiness could

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not keep Bee's eyes open very late. Poor little maid! She had had a long day, and she fell sound asleep while being undressed, a little cart, her goose's egg, clasped tight in her hand. "It would do almost as well for her doll to ride in," she thought, "as a laminator."

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CHAPTER VI.

A TIME OF SORROW.

DARK, misty, dull London weather without; heavy, weary sorrow within,—ever the same rush and turmoil, the same tramp of footsteps, the same rattling of wheels in the street beneath; behind the closed blinds trouble never before realized,—all the burden of a first great grief borne in upon a mind but little prepared for such a shock. Florence Hesketh had lost her mother! She lay upon her bed, her face buried in the pillows, neither speaking nor moving: so she had lain all day. Several times her father had tried to rouse her; but her only answer had been an entreaty to be left quiet, and he had yielded to her wish. Poor undisciplined Florence! she did not think that she was selfish in her grief; she did not know how her father's heart yearned to her, his only one; she was conscious only of one aching sense of misery, that seemed as if it had entered into her very being.

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It was a sad picture, yet how common a one Little recked the busy world passing to and fro in Park Lane of the sorrow that was so near them. Perhaps some, glancing at the house bearing such unmistakeable signs of mourning, had a thought of sympathy for its indwellers, but they were amongst the few. To the many, Park Lane was that day what it always was to them, neither more nor less; they had their own joys, their own griefs—some, perhaps, greater than Florence's: who can tell?

Down at Wykeham there was sorrow, and much, very much sympathy. A telegram had brought the tidings of poor Florence's loss to the Medwin family, and another message had carried to her the promise of her aunt's speedy arrival in town.

Little Beatrix was ailing, and at any other time her mother would not have left her; but the thought of Florence outweighed every consideration, and once more Mrs. Medwin bade her children farewell, and started on a still more sorrowful visit than her previous one.

Margaret's heart felt very full when she wished her mother good-bye. She longed to go to her own room, to indulge at leisure her grief for Florence. "How can she bear it?" thought Margaret; "how

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could we?" She shuddered; the thought was too dreadful to be pursued. She went slowly up to the nursery, where Beatrix was sitting on Ann's lap, fretful and heavy-eyed.

"Will you take her, Miss?" said Ann; "she is very tired, and I think I will get her tea ready, and put her to bed."

"Where's Mamma?" moaned Beatrix. "I want Mamma. Mamma, do come to Bee!"

Margaret's eyes filled with tears as she thought of the mother who had left her child, not for a few days only, but for life. She held out her arms to her little sister; but Bee missed her usually bright manner, and shook her head.

"No, no; I want Mamma," she repeated: "where's Mamma?"

"Come to me, and I will tell you," said Margaret; and the little girl accordingly allowed her sister to take her.

"Mamma has gone to see dear Cousin Florence," began Margaret.

"And Aunt Ellen?" asked Bee.

Margaret felt puzzled; she did not know how to answer the child's question. "Cousin Florence wants Mamma very much," she continued; "so you will spare her a little time, will you not, Bee?"

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"I can't," said Bee; "I have a pain in my head. Florence can have her own mamma."

Margaret's eyes filled again. She asked Ann if Bee's cup of arrowroot were not ready, and drew the little girl's attention to the milk just beginning to boil on the nursery fire. In a few minutes she was released from her post as nurse, and she went downstairs, hoping to find Nigel returned from school. She met him in the hall, and knew by the way he threw down his satchel of books that he, too, had his troubles.

"Is Mamma gone?" was his first question.

"Yes, she left by the four o'clock train. It has seemed such a long day, Nigel, since we had the telegram in the morning."

"Long enough," said Nigel, wearily. "Life is too long by half, Margaret."

"What is the matter?" said Margaret. "Has anything been vexing you?"

"Nothing much; I am out of spirits, that is all," replied Nigel; "and I had a rowing for inattention."

"Because you were thinking about Aunt Ellen?" asked Margaret.

"Something like it. Do you know, Margaret, I

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think school-life is a great mistake. Latin and Greek are not the *ultimata* of one's existence."

"Not to you," said Margaret; "but I sometimes think they are to Alick."

Nigel sighed. "Come into the dining-room, Maggie," he said; "it is not pleasant talking in the hall." He threw his arm round his sister's waist as he spoke, and, entering the room together, they seated themselves half behind the curtains which shaded the deep recess of the window.

"Is Alick come in yet?" said Nigel.

"No," replied Margaret. "Why do you ask?"

"Never mind," began her brother.

"But I do mind," interrupted Margaret. "It is tea-time, and he ought to be in; and you ought not to look mysterious. Where is he?"

"How should I know?" said Nigel. "Alick does not vouchsafe his confidence or his companionship to stupid people like myself; he has struck up a friendship with some fellows of the fifth."

"Do you think he will be in the fifth form next half?" asked Margaret.

"Most likely—indeed, he is almost sure of it. It will be a grand thing for him, Maggie. I don't think there has been so young a boy in the fifth

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since Bentley was in the school; he is Senior Wrangler now at Oxford."

"He will get bullied by the bigger boys, I expect," said Margaret.

"Not he," replied her brother, somewhat bitterly. "Alick knows how to feather his own nest; he curries favour with Ollie and Sackville, and makes himself useful to them now, so that he may be well received eventually. I am thankful I shall not get a rise; I don't like the set."

"Then they will not be good companions for Alick," said Margaret.

"He never did get into scrapes, so let us hope he never will," said Nigel. "One would think we disliked Alick, to hear the way we talk about him, Maggie. It is not right; I have no business to be jealous because he is cleverer than I am."

"I do not think you are," said Margaret, heartily; but Nigel shook his head.

"Yes, I am," he said. "Margaret, do not you sometimes get disgusted with life? One is constantly giving way to such mean, petty feelings. I hate myself sometimes."

"Don't think about it, then," said Margaret.

"But we must think," persisted Nigel. "I have been thinking a great deal lately, and now to-day

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it seems as if I could do nothing else but think. Do you remember that hymn Mamma read on Sunday, about 'the One Life'?"

"Yes," said Margaret; "I am learning it."

"There are two lines which have been running in my head," said Nigel:

> "'We have no time to sport away the hours,
> All must be earnest in a world like ours.'

And then come those horrid lessons, as a practical illustration. It is very hard work to act out one's good impulses."

"Very," responded Margaret, sadly, as she remembered her many neglected duties, her tendency to self-indulgence.

"And it is no use talking," said Nigel, rising up, and shaking himself energetically; "here comes tea. But, Maggie, I think we might try to do a little better, don't you?"

And Margaret answered "Yes," though she did not fully understand or appreciate all that the question involved. Boy-like, Nigel did not like to express half that was passing through his mind; and Margaret, though she fancied she shared all her brother's feelings, knew but little of his yearnings for a better, holier life. Nigel's failings and failures were many; but the good seed was taking

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root in his heart. In due time, would it not bring forth fruit?

In the middle of tea, Alick arrived. He had been walking home with Ollie, he said; and as unpunctuality was not generally one of his faults, the excuse was readily accepted.

Margaret's last business that evening was to look in the nursery, to see if Beatrix were sleeping well. She found the little girl sitting on Ann's lap, restless, feverish, and unwilling to remain in bed.

"She would talk about her Aunt Ellen, Miss," whispered Ann; "I was obliged to tell her."

"I will lend Cousin Florence my mamma," said little Bee, "for a little time—not for very long. Aunt Ellen is gone to be an angel in heaven, Maggie."

"If you will let Ann put you to bed again, I will sing to you," said Margaret.

"Can you sing Mamma's pretty song about 'I want to be an angel'?" asked Beatrix. And when the little girl's head was once more on her pillow, Margaret bent over her, and sang very softly, till the weary eyelids closed, and the child slept soundly.

Mr. Medwin stood at the door as Margaret came to the last verse. "God bless you, my Maggie!"

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he said, when she passed him on her way to her own room; "and God bless and comfort poor Florence, too!"

The days passed on, and the time came for Mrs. Medwin's return home. It had been arranged that she should bring Florence with her. She felt she could not leave the poor girl in that desolate house, where everything around her served but to heighten the sense of her loss. Besides, Florence clung to her aunt, and seemed as if she could not bear the thought of parting from her. So it was proposed that for a time she should live with her cousins at Wykeham, sharing Margaret's studies and pursuits. It was a great trial for Mr. Hesketh to part with his child; but he was necessarily much away from home, and he felt that Florence needed all the constant love and tenderness that none but her aunt could give her; so, with many heart struggles, he consented to the separation.

It was a dreary November day when the travellers were expected, and Margaret, who had been longing for their arrival all the morning, felt in the afternon as if the constant drip-drip of that endless falling rain had worn away all her anticipations, causing her almost to dread the meeting. She could not explain why, but she felt nervous and

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cross. Harry and Donald, who were rather excited at the thought of seeing Mamma again, were making more noise than was pleasant, and Margaret enforced order in no very gentle tone of voice.

"If you make such a racket when Florence comes, she will think the house a perfect bear-garden," she said, indignantly; and the little boys, after some further remonstrance, betook themselves to a corner of the room, where they confabulated more quietly, if not more profitably. Margaret had begged her father to intercede with Miss Weston for a half-holiday; but she had rather repented of her bargain, for it was too wet for Harry and Donald to go out, and they had taken refuge in teasing Beatrix, who was still not quite well enough to bear rough play. They had been persuaded, at length, to leave one sister in peace; but they did not add greatly to the comfort of the other, who had neither the inclination nor the ability to find them amusement for the whole afternoon.

To while away the tedious waiting-time, Margaret took up a book, installed herself in the most comfortable easy-chair, and was soon engaged in the story. She was so interested in her tale, that she was perfectly unconscious of the machinations hatched against her by her mischievous brothers.

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On the sideboard stood a little bottle of gum, which had been used for fastening pictures in a scrap-book that very morning. By this lay a sheet of very small pictures, painted in red and yellow in the most primitive style of art; and for some minutes Harry and Donald busied themselves in cutting them out. When they had so prepared a good many, they crawled on hands and knees behind Margaret's easy-chair, conveying with them their ugly red and yellow scraps and their bottle of gum. Very silently did they set to work, and Margaret read on, quite unconscious that the flowing skirt of her dress was receiving a new trimming, which by no means improved its style.

The plot was one of Harry's suggestion; his mischief generally had the merit of originality, and the effect of Margaret's black merino stuck over with these funny little pictures was so remarkable, that the little boys were obliged to stuff their handkerchiefs in their mouths to restrain their laughter, which was on the point of bursting forth. Harry had just completed a grand constellation in the centre of one width, when the sound of the bell roused him from his labours, and the children all sprang up to meet the travellers.

Margaret, in blissful ignorance of her decora-

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tions, was leading Florence into the room, when an irrepressible shout from the little boys, who now saw their handiwork displayed to the best advantage, attracted everybody's attention. Florence herself, worn, weary, and dispirited as she was, could not help joining in the laugh; and Mrs. Medwin felt she could almost forgive the foolishness of the joke when she found it had won a smile from her niece. But Margaret was very angry; she had been forming so many plans for giving her cousin the warmest possible welcome, and it hurt her dignity exceedingly to be displayed, in the first moment of greeting, in a ridiculous light.

She broke away to tear off the offending additions to her toilet, forgetting that she had hardly spoken to her mother, and not thinking that at such a time her behaviour was ungracious.

Harry and Donald were quite dismayed to see how speedily she ran upstairs; and the banging of the bedroom door, which resounded through the house, expressed Margaret's irritation as fully as words could have done.

The traces of gum were very difficult to remove, and Margaret, still irate, went to her mother's room to suggest that Harry and Donald ought to be punished for their misdemeanour.

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"Indeed it was very naughty of them," said Mrs. Medwin, "and I shall speak to them about it; but, Maggie dear, for Florence's sake, pass it over to-night. Another time such an offence would meet with its deserts; but this evening I should like all to be peace and harmony."

"My new dress is ruined," grumbled Margaret. "It is too bad that the boys should be encouraged in mischief."

"Margaret, you forget yourself," said Mrs. Medwin, gravely. "I did not think a show of ill-temper would be your first greeting to me."

"But, Mamma, I have cause," said Margaret, blushing.

"Yes, I know you have; but remember, Maggie dear, 'He that ruleth his spirit, is better than he that taketh a city.'"

The gentle voice had its usual soothing influence. Margaret threw her arms round her mother's neck, and whispered, "I am very sorry, Mamma darling."

Mrs. Medwin kissed her, and stroked back the brown hair, which would ripple into curls despite Margaret's endeavours to arrange it in maidenly braids. "Suppose you go and help Florence," she said, "and I will join you in a minute."

Florence had taken off her bonnet, and was

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sitting with her head resting on her hands; but she rose as Margaret entered, and began hurriedly to arrange her hair, standing so that her cousin could not see her face.

"Are you very tired, Florence?" asked Margaret.

"Yes, very," was the reply, and the weariness of the tone and attitude fully confirmed the words.

"Dear Flo," said Margaret, drawing nearer, "you cannot think how glad I am that you are come to us!"

"Thank you!" said Florence; but there was no heartiness in her manner, and Margaret, feeling a little chilled and uncomfortable, made no more demonstrative speeches. She contented herself with rendering as much assistance as was in her power, and then she asked if her cousin would not come down to tea.

"I suppose I must," said Florence.

Margaret eagerly offered to bring her some to her own room, but Florence shook her head. "No, it will be better to go at once, and get it over," she said; and just then Mrs. Medwin tapped at the door, and they all three went down together.

Poor Florence! she hardly knew how to bear the outward expression of love and sympathy; it

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seemed to her as if Harry and Donald were watching her every movement. Their attentive, eager faces so constantly turned towards her were almost too much for her, and she involuntarily pushed her chair more into the shade. Margaret was not devoid of tact, and she began talking to the little boys; while they, surprised at her kind manner, and contrite for the annoyance they had caused her, willingly took her advice with regard to finding some amusement for themselves during the evening.

Florence retired early, glad to plead her journey as an excuse for so doing; and, indeed, her pale cheeks and heavy eyes testified clearly to her need of rest. She thought, as she laid her aching head on the pillow, that a strange and sorrowful life had begun for her. Hitherto she had been the one home darling, whose happiness both father and mother had kept constantly in view; her childhood had been so bright, the future seemed so dreary. How would it all end? Florence had not yet learnt where to find true rest; but, for the time being, bodily exhaustion had its power in lulling mental pain, and soon the weary girl was sleeping soundly.

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CHAPTER VII.

QUEEN BEE DETHRONED.

"LOOK here, Maggie!—is not this woful?" said Florence, one morning after she had been settled a few weeks at Wykeham. As she spoke, she displayed a long trailing piece of crape-trimming hanging from the skirt of her dress.

"How did you do it?" asked Margaret.

"Why, I became unfortunately attached to a nail sticking out of the closet in my room, and I could not leave it without—not *heart*-rendings, but something rather like it. How is it to be put to rights?"

"You must mend it, I suppose," said Margaret, moving towards the door.

Florence made a grimace, and laid a detaining hand on her cousin's arm. "I make such a muddle of things when I try to mend them. Do you think Ann would do it for me, Maggie?"

"She is so busy this morning, Flo," returned Margaret, decidedly; "I think you must not ask

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her. Mamma will not like her to be called off her work."

"Then I suppose I must do it myself," said Florence, disconsolately. "Oh dear me!"

"If you like to wait till after lessons, I will do it for you," said Margaret; "but I have something to prepare for Miss Weston now."

"You are a darling," cried Florence; "I knew you would be a Sister of Mercy. But, Maggie dear, I cannot go about in this style all the morning. I am going out with Auntie, and she will not like to see me so untidy. There is plenty of time before Miss Weston comes; don't you think you could manage to do it first?"

"Well, give it to me quickly, then," said Margaret, a little impatiently. "I wish you would say what you mean at first, instead of beating about the bush."

Florence laughed, took off her dress, threw it at her cousin, and sat down on the floor to watch operations.

"Do you long for after Christmas, Flo?" said Margaret, when she had fairly embarked in her work.

"No; why?" returned Florence, rather absently. "Oh, I know what you mean!" she con-

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tinued, suddenly, "I shall begin to study with you, and the new governess will come. Yes, I think it will be pleasant for some things. I wonder what Miss Dacre is like."

"I shall be very sorry when Miss Weston goes," said Margaret, "though she does worry perpetually, and one does nothing but grind away at the same old routine."

"You will have to work harder, I expect," said Florence. "Will Miss Dacre teach Harry and Donald too, Maggie?"

"No; Harry is to go to a day-school, I believe, and Mamma will take Donald for a little time, so that we may have every possible advantage. Papa has taken it into his head that I am backward, because I could not remember the capital of Van Diemen's Land the other day; but I never do know anything when I am asked suddenly."

"I cannot think why that is," said Florence. "Now, I am not very learned, but I know how to make a little go a long way. It is astonishing how clever some people think me."

"Yes; even Aunt Jane was surprised, and said you seemed to know more than she gave you credit for," said Margaret.

"Very kind of Aunt Jane," resumed Florence,

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complacently. "Do you know, I think I am decidedly conversational, Maggie."

"Conceited, did you say?" said Margaret, dryly. "Yes, I think you are rather."

Florence shrugged her shoulders, with a pretty spoiled child gesture, and looked at her watch. "You must be quick, Maggie," she said; "it is later than I thought."

"I have nearly finished," said Margaret, stitching away diligently. "What a pretty watch that is of yours, Florence. I wish I had one."

"Mamma gave it to me last birthday," replied Florence, a shade stealing over her countenance.

There was a few minutes' silence, only interrupted by the click of Margaret's needle. Just as her labours were drawing to a completion, Donald was heard outside the door, calling his sister to come downstairs. "Miss Weston has been waiting at least five minutes," he said, "and you are to come at once."

"Oh, Florence," said Margaret, reproachfully, "how could you let me work on so late, and I have not prepared half my lessons!"

"I am so sorry," said Florence, bending forward to kiss her. "Say you forgive me!"

But Margaret was provoked, and walked quickly

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away, pretending not to notice the proffered caress. When she was alone, Florence stood some minutes before the glass, re-arranging her dress and putting several finishing touches to her toilet, with a vanity for which we must allow she had much excuse. She then went to the drawing-room, and practised diligently for some time. Her playing, like everything else she undertook, was very effective, and Florence showed much more perseverance in music than in any other study.

While she was thus engaged, her aunt opened the door, leading Beatrix. "Florence, dear," she said, "may I leave Bee in your charge for a little time? Ann's mother is taken ill, and she is going to see her, which gives me a great deal to do this morning."

"Oh, certainly, Auntie!" replied Florence. "Come here, Bee."

But though Florence accepted the duty imposed on her, she had no intention of being disturbed in her practice.

For a minute or two Beatrix was content in watching her cousin's rapid fingers as they skimmed along the piano; but that amusement could not last long.

"Me play," said Bee; and her little hands

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thumped down on the notes, producing anything but harmony.

"Oh, don't do that!" cried Florence. "Indeed, Bee, dear, you must not!"

Beatrix desisted for a moment; but the temptation was very great, and in another minute bang went the unfortunate piano again.

"You are a very naughty child," said Florence, sharply; she had no patience with little children, and did not at all understand how to manage them. "Go away directly, Beatrix!" As she spoke, she pushed the tiny hands roughly off the piano, and the little girl began to cry.

"Hush! hush!" said Florence, a little alarmed at the sight of tears. "Oh, pray do not cry! I am sure you are not hurt. What would you like to do? Would you like to look at a picture-book? I dare say I can find you one."

Beatrix was easily pacified, and her April shower quickly subsided when her cousin supplied her with entertainment, in the shape of a handsomely-bound "Book of Beauty," seating her by the table, and saying,—

"Now, Beatrix, if I let you look at these pretty ladies, you must not disturb me any more."

Beatrix was delighted—she had never been al-

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lowed to look at such a grand book by herself before; and Florence, quite happy at having secured a little peace, returned to her "Nocturne."

All went on quietly for some minutes; but soon the little girl at the round table began to find her large volume rather difficult to manage; her chair was too low, and she could not see well. To remedy this defect, Beatrix went in search of a footstool, placed it on her chair, and tried to mount. This was no easy task, but she at last established herself on her unsteady throne. She was so charmed at her success, that she turned round to call her cousin's attention; the stool slipped, and with it down fell poor little Beatrix, in her fright catching at the table-cloth, and pulling it down with her, together with the "Book of Beauty," an inkstand, and a vase of wax-flowers, which, as well as the glass shade that covered it, was entirely broken.

Such a sight there was when, at the first shriek, Mrs. Medwin hurried into the room! There lay Beatrix on the floor, refusing to let Florence touch her; one side of her face covered with the ink which stood in a pool near her, her lip bleeding from the fall; while the *débris* of glass and broken wax and alabaster were strewn all round.

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Mrs. Medwin raised the child in her arms, and carried her immediately into the nursery to examine the extent of her injuries, which at first sight seemed alarming. One little pearly tooth had been knocked out, and the gash on her lip, which was much swollen, gave the poor child great pain, and promised to be a serious disfigurement for some time.

Florence was left standing in the drawing-room, utterly bewildered. She did not attempt to clear away any of the broken ornaments which stared her most reproachfully in the face.

At last she was roused by the entrance of Margaret, who, without paying any attention to her cousin, began to collect some of the fragments. Florence offered to assist her; but Margaret shook her head, saying grimly, "Take care, or you will be cut by the bits of glass! Cook is coming to sweep them up."

"How is Bee?" asked Florence, faintly.

"She is very much hurt indeed," was the reply. "Poor little darling! I wish Mamma had called *me* to take care of her."

"I am sure I did not know what she was doing," said Florence.

"No, of course not! Nobody supposes you let

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her hurt herself like that on purpose. Poor little Bee! She will never be pretty again; it will leave a frightful scar."

"Oh, Margaret," said Florence, "I am sure it is not so bad as that! She will look as well as ever in a little while."

"No, she won't," returned Margaret. "I cannot think why you could not just take the trouble to see that she was safe from harm. It was so thoroughly selfish."

"It was nothing of the sort. You are very unkind," said Florence, bursting into tears. "Oh, I wish I had never come here! Nobody loves me, and I am perfectly miserable."

Just at that moment Miss Weston came into the room. She had allowed Margaret to go to hear what was the matter, and, finding she did not return, had come to see if her pupil's assistance were really required.

She arrived in time to prevent further altercation, and told Margaret to go at once to the school-room. Margaret ought to have done so before; but she forgot her own duty in her desire to point out how much Florence had neglected hers, and it was in no very amiable frame of mind that she resumed her lessons.

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Florence took refuge in her own room. She threw herself on the bed, sobbing violently. She would have been exceedingly sorry for the misfortune; but Margaret's taunts had changed the aspect of affairs. "Aunt had no business to make a nursemaid of me," she said to herself. "I did not come here to be made use of. It was not my fault if Beatrix would not sit as I placed her—after I had taken the trouble to find her something to look at, too!" So Florence argued. Every moment served but to increase her stock of grievances, and she worked herself up into an agony. "She was miserable here," she said; "she could not bear it any longer. She would write to Papa to come and fetch her home. She was not accustomed to a house full of tiresome children. And Margaret, too! she was so rude, so unladylike, to speak like that! But what could she expect in a place like Wykeham! Perhaps, in time, she would grow as unmannerly herself." So she went on, exaggerating every trifle that had given her annoyance since she had first come to stay with her cousins; till, at last, her imaginary trials appeared so great, that she determined to write at once to her father, to say she could bear them no longer. She had just opened her desk, and arranged her writing materials, when

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a quiet tap was heard at the door, and Mrs. Medwin entered.

"I am come to tell you, Florence," she said, and her voice did not sound severe, "that Bee is more comfortable now. I am going to try if I can hush her to sleep; but I thought you would like to know how she was first."

"Thank you," said Florence, and she avoided meeting her aunt's eye, fearing lest her determination should be shaken. But, struggle as she would, Florence could not restrain her rising tears; they would fall, and her sobs were not to be controlled.

"My dear child," said Mrs. Medwin, drawing her niece closer to her, "you must not distress yourself like that. I hope Bee will be quite well in a day or two, though she will not lose the scar so speedily."

Florence looked up in her aunt's face, the thought of her intended letter fast fading from her mind. "Then you are not angry with me, Auntie?" she said.

"I hope you will be more careful another time, dear. When I left Beatrix with you, I had forgotten how unaccustomed you were to have the charge of children. We must be thankful the little one is not more seriously hurt."

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"I am very sorry," stammered Florence; and she looked so pretty in her penitence, that her aunt only kissed and comforted her, and forgot to administer the well-deserved rebuke.

Margaret would not have met with quite such lenient treatment under similar circumstances; but Florence, who had never heard a harsh word—who had no mother of her own to correct her faults lovingly—it was so easy to spare her, so difficult to give distress by showing her failings in a true light.

"I must not stay," said Mrs. Medwin, when Florence's face began to lose its sorrowful expression. "Would you like to come and see Bee before she goes to sleep?"

Florence shook her head. "I—I want to write to Papa by the early post," she said; "there is not much time to spare." She dreaded the sight of the little girl's disfigured countenance, and to foster her self-indulgence she said what was not exactly true. She had no intention of writing to her father on the subject which had filled her mind a few minutes before; and, though she owed him a letter, yet the evening mail would have answered all purposes as well.

Mrs. Medwin felt there was some selfishness in the reply, and left the room without saying any-

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thing more. Florence turned again to her desk and began her letter; but she was now in no humour for writing, and, dissatisfied with her attempts, she threw herself back in an easy-chair, and took up a book. So Margaret found her when she came to tell her it was time to dress for a walk. Margaret was a little ashamed of the way in which she had spoken to her cousin, and was disposed to conciliate. "If your letter is ready, we can post it," she said.

"It is not finished," replied Florence, blushing a little, and not raising her eyes from her book.

Margaret elevated her eyebrows. "Why, Mamma said you wanted to send it by the morning post, and we were to be out quickly, or it would be too late." As she spoke, she glanced at the sheet of paper which lay open on the desk, and saw that only three lines were written. Margaret thought her cousin must be very changeable to have made so little progress in a note about which she had been sufficiently anxious to prevent her from going to see Beatrix; but, as she wished to keep the peace, she made no further remark, and the girls silently equipped for their walk.

Florence soon recovered her spirits, and exerted herself to be entertaining; and Margaret yielded

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herself to her cousin's powers of fascination. She even fancied that it was very sweet-tempered of Florence to forgive her unkind speeches so readily, and a similar idea passed through her companion's own mind. Truly, the power of pleasing and external loveliness are great gifts! Rightly used, what a beneficial influence they might exert! But they were a snare to Florence. She mistook her love of admiration for real generosity, and felt completely satisfied with herself when, at the end of the walk, she graciously accepted Margaret's awkwardly tendered apologies, which were certainly due, and which were very earnest.

Florence easily persuaded herself that she had made ample compensation in taking home a box of bonbons for Bee; and the flush of pleasure which spread over the little girl's face at the sight of it prevented her from seeing how very much the child was shaken by the fall. No one blamed Florence openly, therefore she congratulated herself that no great wrong had been done; and while she pitied Beatrix more loudly than anybody else, she seemed quite to forget her own share in the accident.

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CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE ICE.

"MAMMA, are you coming to hear the speeches?" asked Nigel, the day before the Christmas holidays began.

"Yes, I think I shall; it will be something to interest Florence. Shall I have the pleasure of seeing you carry off a prize, Nigel?"

"No, mother dear; I am afraid not. Alick will sustain the credit of the family. Do not rely upon me."

"You must not be content with doing worst because you cannot do best, my boy," said Mrs. Medwin.

"I have been trying lately, Mamma," replied Nigel, gravely, "but it is difficult. I used to think it did not matter where I was, if I could not be at the head of the class; but I was not often first, and I got a great deal of extra work from being idle, so lately I have taken a little more pains."

"I don't think that is your only motive, Nigel,"

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said his mother, looking at him with loving eyes. Nigel's face flushed as he answered,—

"I don't like lessons well enough to work for the sake of work, or for prizes either; but it was not right when I shirked."

"No; and I am glad you have found that out for yourself. If you learn to do a thing heartily because it is right, it will help you in many ways besides Greek and Latin."

"Yes, I know," returned Nigel. "Mamma, sometimes I am glad of the lessons. My life would be too easy without."

"You do not want to make yourself troubles, do you?" said Mrs. Medwin, smiling.

"No; but too much happiness makes one forget. Those horrid books are good little worries, I believe," said Nigel.

"The knights of the olden time did not gain greater victories than our boys of the present day may do. Remember that, Nigel, and take good courage."

Nigel nodded, kissed his mother, and ran off to school with a light heart. He soon caught up his brother, who had started earlier, and whose pace was not so rapid.

"Well, Alick," cried Nigel, clapping him on the

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back. "Are you dreaming about to-morrow's honours?"

Alick shook off his brother's hand rather peevishly.

"There's no need to make such a row about it," he said. "You are so rough, Nigel."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" said Nigel kindly. "You look white, old fellow; don't you feel well?"

"Yes, of course," returned Alick; "what a plague you are!"

"It is not worth being cross about it, at any rate," said Nigel; and just then the boys espied some of their elder schoolfellows a little ahead of them. Alick immediately left his brother, and ran after them, and Nigel looked grave.

"He won't come to any good if those are his friends," he thought. "I wish Alick would take advice."

But the present was no time for warning, however desirable it might seem. Alick was on the eve of gaining his victory—a different kind to Nigel's, for it served to elate him, while, as the elder boy pressed on his upward path, he learnt day by day more fully to conquer by a strength that was not his own, by "the grace that God giveth unto the humble."

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Prize day came, and Alick received his full measure of commendation and applause. He had, indeed, worked well; and had fairly earned his laurels and his promotion. Poor boy! his triumph did not seem to give him so much pleasure as he expected. He was feeling tired and worn out with the extra work of the examination, and the compliments he received from the examiners, to which he had secretly looked forward, fell flat on his ear. He comported himself outwardly very well; and the ladies admired his modest bearing as much as the gentlemen did his industry and talent. Modest bearing it might have been, but not modest thoughts. Alick was pluming himself on his superiority to his brother, and congratulating himself on the independence of action which his move upward would give him. Nigel, being in a lower form, would hardly venture now to interfere with any of his doings, he thought. He was not a little surprised when Nigel, too, was called forward to receive a prize—one only, it is true, and that inferior to any of Alick's, but still a prize, and all the sweeter because it was totally unexpected. Nigel's broad smile of satisfaction and eager step forward amused some of the spectators. It was so different from his brother's quiet, almost shy

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manner. "I am glad your elder boy has some encouragement," said a gentleman to Mrs. Medwin; "it must be trying to see his brother carry the upper hand in everything. It would be a great cause of jealousy with some lads."

Certainly Nigel did not appear to distress himself much at being left behind. He seemed to have shaken off any old feelings of ill-will he might have once entertained towards his more successful brother, and he spread abroad the fame of Alick's triumph with great zeal and pride, claiming his father's praise and sympathy so uproariously for the new fifth form boy, that it was not until the next day that Mr. Medwin discovered that Nigel himself deserved his share of commendation.

The holidays began under very favourable auspices, as far as weather was concerned. A good sharp frost had set in, and it was reported that Sedgemere canal was in condition for skating. The boys were very desirous of organizing an expedition to this canal. Some of their friends had already been there, and had tested the strength of the ice, so that there were no fears on that ground. The canal was a favourite resort with Wykeham people in skating season. There was never much

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excitement in that quiet town, and the inhabitants tried to make the most of what little they had. Young ladies, too, joined in the exercise, which served to make it more attractive to the world at large, so a sharp winter to the villagers of Sedgemere was quite a gala time.

Alick would have been content to go alone with his brother to enjoy the fun, but Nigel had heard Florence express a wish to join them, and he tried to persuade his mother, with the two girls, and Harry and Donald, to form a party. Alick grumbled a little in an under tone at the suggestion.

"What is the use of taking those children?" he said; "they will be slipping down, or slipping in, all the time. If I go to Sedgemere, I go to skate, not to play nursemaid to Harry and Donald."

"They will not come much in your way, I daresay," returned Nigel. "Oh! Mamma, do let us go all together. I only wish it was not too far for Queen Bee."

"That is out of the question, at any rate," said Mrs. Medwin.

"I will carry her on my back part of the way, if you will let us take her," continued good-natured Nigel, but his mother shook her head, and Nigel turned to Margaret.

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"You will come, won't you, Maggie?" he said.

Margaret shivered. She had a very bad cold, which disinclined her for much exertion, though she did not wish to give up the scheme.

"Yes, I should like it," she said, "if you do not stand about too long."

"Your cold must be better first, Maggie," said Mrs. Medwin; "I am afraid it would not be very wise of you to attempt it."

"Well, if Margaret can't come, we must leave Harry and Don behind, that's clear," said Alick; "they will want some one to look after them, and Nigel and I cannot be expected to do that."

When the morrow came Margaret's cold was decidedly worse: it was out of the question for her to go to Sedgemere. Mamma, too, found that her engagements would prevent her from taking so long a walk, and she decided that it would be better not to trust the little boys without either herself or their sister. "What will Florence do?" she asked.

"Oh! I will go with the boys, please, Aunt," replied Florence. "You will have me, won't you, Nigel?"

Nigel looked delighted; his admiration of his

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cavaliers, almost unable to preserve their
brium, and vainly wishing that they had not

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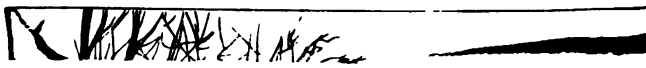

Going to skate.—P. 118.

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been tempted to leave *terra firma.* Then there was a tribe of small urchins enjoying the slides and bearing the tumbles with great fortitude; while above the clamour of the boys and the suppressed screams of some of the tottering damsels rose the shrill voice of a vendor of roast chestnuts and bulls'-eyes, who seemed to be driving a thriving trade amongst the younger portion of the community.

"We had better skate by turns," said Nigel to his brother; "we cannot leave Flo both at once. I had no idea there would be so many people here."

"Very well," returned Alick. "I suppose I may as well go first. I will come back in a little time."

He fastened on his skates, and was soon careering after some of his schoolfellows, whom he had espied at the other end of the canal. Nigel looked after him with longing eyes, boy-like, finding it very difficult to resist joining in the sport, but with his duties as escort and protector full in his mind. Florence half guessed his thoughts, and exerted herself to amuse him with her lively talk and observations on what was passing around.

"I wonder who those smart people are down by

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the boat-house," she said; "their costumes are a shade too fashionable for Wykeham manufacture. See, Nigel—how well those girls are skating! Shall we walk that way and look?"

"No," returned Nigel; "I think we are better where we are. The grandees won't like to be stared at. I suppose they come from Sedgemere Hall. Colonel Wayland always has the house full at Christmas time."

"You don't know them, then?" said Florence.

"Not in the least—how should I? They are not in our circle exactly, Flo. Where can Alick be? Do you see him? My feet are burning to be on the ice."

"Then stay on shore, or the ice will be melted," said Florence, laughing. "I saw Alick with some tall grammar boys a minute ago, but he has disappeared in the crowd."

"Suppose we take a turn," said Nigel; "it is cold standing here. I wish you could skate, Flo; we could all go together then."

"Well, do not wait any longer," returned his cousin, good-naturedly. "People have seen us together, so they will know I have some one to take care of me. I will walk briskly up and down if you will keep within sight."

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"But I don't like to leave you," began Nigel.

"Yes, do go," persisted Florence, who could be very kind when she liked. "I want to see you skate; besides, Alick will soon be back; you can send him to me."

Nigel did not hesitate any longer, and Florence was soon left alone, feeling a little piqued to think that she could not be always the first attraction. She looked again at the merry party whose stylish appearance had attracted her attention before, and longed to be amongst them. "I may just as well walk that way," she thought, and she set off at a quick pace, for the cold was pinching, and feet and fingers were feeling rather numb. When she reached the boat-house, she stopped for a minute to watch, and suddenly, to her great astonishment, she heard her own name pronounced by a young lady, who emerged from the group of skaters with the evident intention of accosting her.

Florence's first feeling was one of annoyance that she had parted with her escort, but it was too late for retreat, and, when she recognised an old London acquaintance, she could not but be pleased at meeting with a familiar face so unexpectedly.

The young lady skated rapidly to the edge of the

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bank; her merry countenance expressing as much surprise as Florence's.

"It really is you," she said, as Florence hastened towards her. "I thought my eyes could not be mistaken; but who would have dreamt of finding Florence Hesketh wandering about all alone by Sedgemere canal!"

"Who would have thought of finding Alice Gresham skating on it!" returned Florence, gaily. "How did you come here, Alice?"

"Wait till I have got rid of my skates, and I will tell you," replied Miss Gresham, beckoning as she spoke to a servant, who soon enabled her to join her newly-found friend on the bank. "I am staying with my cousins at the Hall— Stay, you know them, Flo. I brought them to a party at your house once—don't you remember?"

"I think I do," returned Florence, not sure whether she coveted a renewal of the acquaintance.

"With whom are you?" asked Miss Gresham. "I did not know that any one besides myself had discovered this uninhabited part of the globe."

"I am with my cousins, but they are skating," replied Florence. "I must go and find them."

"What cousins?" continued Miss Gresham, who

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saw no reason why Florence should not be communicative. "Do they know my friends? Of course they do, though, for Uncle Wayland seems to visit with almost everybody round here. Is their name Hesketh?"

"No; Medwin," replied Florence. "I really must not stop, Alice; perhaps we may find some other opportunity of meeting."

"Oh! stay one minute. I have so much to say, and I came off the ice solely for your benefit. Medwin—Medwin—I certainly know the name. Where can I have seen it? Do they live at Wykeham?"

"Yes," said Florence, provoked at the continued questioning.

"I cannot think where I have met with the name," continued Miss Gresham. "Oh! I know; we went to a bookseller's shop the other day, a Mr. Medwin's—how silly of me; of course it is not the same. Give me your address, Flo; and I will bring my cousins to see you."

Florence blushed. "That is where I am staying," she answered; "Mr. Medwin in Princes Street is my uncle."

"Oh!" said Miss Gresham. And she paused. "Must you go, Florence?"

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At that moment Nigel joined them, skates in hand, his face rosy with exercise. "I am glad you have found a friend, Flo," he said, "I was afraid you would be dull." He looked so bright and handsome, that Florence had no scruples in introducing him to Miss Gresham, who was evidently somewhat relieved at seeing such a presentable specimen of boyhood, and said, "You must come and speak to Aunt, Florence. She has often heard of you, and I should so like her to see you."

Mrs. Wayland was already coming towards her niece, surprised to see her in conversation with strangers. She spoke kindly to Florence, and said she was sure her daughters would be pleased to meet her again.

"Will not you and your cousin come home to luncheon with us?" she said. "Alice will be so pleased to have her old friend, and then you can see Kate and Adelaide."

Florence looked at Nigel, who half shook his head, and she replied, "I am afraid we must not, Mrs. Wayland. My aunt will not know what has become of us."

Mrs. Wayland was struck with Florence's beauty. She had, as she herself owned, a weakness for pretty people; and she was always seek-

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ing some fresh attraction, which for the time being was superior to everything else. She had already made up her mind that Florence was very charming, and she renewed her invitation in such a manner that it admitted of no refusal.

"If you like, Florence, we can send word home by Alick where we are," said Nigel, who in his turn was pleased with Mrs. Wayland's kind manner.

"Yes, that is the very thing," cried that lady, not troubling herself to inquire who Alick might be. "Will you go and deliver your message, and then follow us to the Hall? It is time we were on the move."

Nigel soon found Alick, who was nothing loth to return in company with his schoolfellows. He was not of a very sociable disposition, and was thankful he had not to share his brother's fate in going amongst strangers; so he promised to explain all to Mrs. Medwin, and left Nigel to make his way back to his new friends. Mrs. Wayland had collected her scattered flock, and was leading the way to the Hall, with Florence by her side, in high spirits, reviving old London reminiscences with Alice Gresham, and making friendly advances to the Miss Waylands. Nigel felt rather shy, and

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secretly wished himself on the road back to Wykeham, but he had some curiosity to see the interior of Sedgemere Hall, whose moat and drawbridge had often excited his interest. Florence, as we have said, was really enjoying herself; it was the first approach to anything like gaiety she had had for some time. Had she been asked the day before, she would have thought she felt no inclination for it; but she was young, and naturally buoyant, and it was almost a relief to her to forget her sorrow for awhile, and to meet with some variety. It seemed more like the atmosphere of her old home life; very different from the quiet humdrum existence at Wykeham. She felt that she was admired, and she exerted herself to the utmost to show to the best advantage. As usual, she succeeded. None of the pretty young ladies at Sedgemere could compete with her in personal attractions, and Mrs. Wayland quite rejoiced in having secured such a delightful *protégée*. Mrs. Wayland was a good-natured, thoughtless kind of woman, rather deficient in dignity; but, as her husband possessed enough of that quality for the whole household, it did not so much signify.

Colonel Wayland was a little surprised at the addition to his guests; he secretly hoped that his

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wife really knew who her new visitors were, and in the meantime he consoled himself with noticing Florence's graceful movements, so far removed from anything plebeian.

"I am going to drive into Wykeham this afternoon," said Mrs. Wayland to Florence, "so I can take you home. Where did you say your uncle lived? I did not catch his name exactly."

Florence would have given all she was worth at that moment to have been able to mention some more fashionable address. She left Nigel to answer for her, and was seized with the uncomfortable idea that Colonel Wayland was looking her through and through, wondering how a tradesman's niece had managed to make acquaintance with his daughters.

He was very courteous in his manner, however, and probably was not so much shocked as Florence's false pride made her fear. Kate and Adelaide Wayland did look rather supercilious, it is true; but their mother was more filled with the spirit of patronage than ever. She compassionated Florence in her own mind for being placed in very uncongenial circumstances. "I shall hope to see you very often," she said; "your aunt must spare you to come and stay with us." She drew Flo-

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rence into a recess where they could talk more freely. "Are you not very dull at Wykeham?" she asked.

Florence owned that she was sometimes, but added that she had been glad to be quiet of late.

"Yes," said Mrs. Wayland, caressing her, "but, dear child, you must not shut yourself up too much. You will become morbid and despondent; it will do you good to see a little of my girls—besides, you must miss the society you have been accustomed to."

Florence was quite willing to be thought superior to her cousins, and for the time being felt quite like a heroine surrounded by adverse circumstances. She congratulated herself on finding herself at last in her proper element, and was sorry when the carriage was announced, and she had to wish most of the party good-bye.

Nigel was sitting opposite to her, so she had no opportunity for further confidences with Mrs. Wayland on their way into Wykeham, but she managed to keep up the favourable impression she had already made; and when they reached Princes Street, her friend said,—

"May I venture to call on your aunt, Florence?

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I want to arrange a time for you to come and stay with us."

"Oh! thank you," said Florence, with an inward feeling of disturbance, as she remembered that there was no fire lighted in the drawing-room, and that there would probably be a whole stack of family stockings, in course of darning, in the dining-room. Her anticipations were not very far wrong, for Mrs. Medwin was busy at work, and Florence eyed the large hen-and-chickens work-basket with great disdain as she ushered Mrs. Wayland in. She was painfully struck, too, with the shabbiness of the carpet, and wished that Margaret could have chosen any other time for having a violent cold—it was so very unbecoming to her. Margaret, certainly, did not show to advantage. She always looked very miserable if she was not quite well, and she had been feeling very dull all day, and was not at all obliged to her cousin for bringing in Mrs. Wayland just when she was enjoying a refreshing doze in an arm-chair by the fire. But Florence need not have been so distressed about appearances—there was nothing in either the room or its occupants to be ashamed of. Mrs. Wayland had sufficient discernment to be pleased with Mrs. Medwin's quiet, self-possessed manner. She did

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not expect grandeur in Princes Street, and her mind was so full of her new favourite, Florence, as to prevent her from being critical.

When it came to the point, it was difficult to decide on the exact time for Florence's visit to Sedgemere; but Mrs. Wayland, as she rose to take leave, expressed her wish that it might soon take place, and in the meantime promised to call on Florence whenever she drove into Wykeham. She departed all smiles and affability, leaving Florence in a whirl of delight at the prospects before her. She found it difficult to settle down quietly to work with Margaret, who, out of spirits and a little disposed to be jealous of her cousin's success, took but slight interest in her account of the day's amusement.

At the close of the afternoon Florence felt more fully convinced than ever that the daily routine of life at Wykeham was very wearisome. Perhaps Alick felt so too; for he appeared just before tea-time to say that he was going to spend the evening with his friend Ollie. He did not come home till very late, urging as his excuse that he had no watch like Nigel, and that he was not aware of the hour. He received his father's reproof very quietly, but made up for it by disturbing Nigel, who was already in his first sleep.

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"What have you been doing all the evening?" asked the sleepy elder brother; but Alick would not answer him, and only showed that he was not in a good temper by moving about as noisily as possible, till Nigel began to think all hopes of repose were over.

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CHAPTER IX.

TEMPTATION.

Two boys were walking briskly up the broad gravel path of the Wykeham Abbey grounds. One was a tall lad about seventeen, handsome and well built, with something determined in his bearing which seemed to have great influence over his younger and slighter companion. They were talking earnestly.

"Then you will come and see me to-night," said the bigger boy, "and I'll put you up to a little more sport."

"I am not sure whether I can," was the answer, given in a doubtful tone.

"Why not? whatever on earth have you to do?"

"Nothing particular — only — I think I won't come to-night, Ollie," returned Alick, for he it was.

"Did your respected parents twig that you were

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at the theatre the other evening, and refuse to let you have cake for tea the next day?" asked Ollie, jeeringly.

"Not they," replied Alick, drawing himself up.

"Then you are afraid of being found out in your evil ways, eh, Master Alick? I wonder whether Medwin, senior, would be very angry with you. I shall tell him he ought to look after his younger brother a little more."

"You had better not," rejoined Alick; "there won't be any advantage in so doing."

Ollie laughed.

"Well, if you never begin to strike for liberty, you never will get it; it is best to get one's way betimes. My people are well broken in now; they never venture to inquire into my comings and goings."

"You are older than I am," said Alick.

"At any rate," continued Ollie, "you had better try to win back that half-sovereign you lost the other night. I am going to the billiard-room at the Red Lion about seven o'clock this evening. It is good sport. I will take you with me, and you can go home as early as you like."

"Can't promise," was Alick's laconic reply.

Ollie stopped short, turned to face his com-

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panion, planted both hands firmly on his shoulders, and said quietly,—

"I tell you what it is, Medwin, junior: you are a little whipper-snapper, who has no business whatever in the fifth form. I am kind enough to undertake your education, and I will not have you ungrateful. If Telemachus is not docile, Mentor will be a very thorn in his side. You will come and see me to-night?"

"Yes," said Alick, shaking himself free from his companion's grasp, and Ollie walked on smiling, and holding up his handsome head, with a conscious feeling of power. He, too, remembered the time when he had been cajoled into doing what had then caused him many twinges of conscience. These had been deadened long ago: he rejoiced in the fulness of his vigorous boyhood, in his freedom from all restraint, in his mental and physical strength. Just now it pleased him to exercise that strength over Alick Medwin; and Alick, with no real liking for many of Ollie's amusements, was drawn into them, because he was flattered by the notice of his tall, popular schoolfellow, and because he thought such a friendship reflected some dignity and honour on himself. Alick did not feel quite comfortable, however; he had a very great dread

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of detection, and his careful home training made him shrink from the coarse language and low tastes that Ollie and his set often indulged in. But what was he to do? He, the youngest in his form, could not stand the bullying of a combined crew of sturdy fellows, which he knew would be inevitably his lot if he refused to follow in their steps. It was true that a few fifth form boys declined to submit to Ollie's guidance, and chose for themselves a steadier, better course; but they were in the minority, and Alick had already made up his mind not to join the "good clique." He would be very careful, he thought; would avoid all the mischief that could possibly be avoided, and hoped that he should be able to take a middle course, which would keep him on good terms with both parties; but he already saw that he had a difficult part to act, and he dreaded the coming half year, when he felt that Ollie's tutelage might possibly lead him into some trouble. Yet he made but very feeble efforts to shake off the yoke. Ollie was a favourite with the masters, as well as with the boys; he had never been found out in any flagrant delinquency, and Alick was persuaded that there were great advantages accruing from his protection.

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Alick was somewhat of a politician in his own little world, but even the greatest statesman cannot always cast his calculations aright, and Alick was playing a hazardous game. Another reason why he was by no means anxious to join Ollie at the billiard-room that evening, was that he had already lost half-a-sovereign by betting at that very same place, and he knew that if he went he should probably be induced to bet again, and he had no wish to run the risk of losing more money. Alick was generally the rich member of his family. He was prudent and careful, and when he made an outlay it was usually a wise one. In this he differed from Nigel, who was renowned for making bad bargains. There was a family legend to the effect that Uncle Hesketh had once presented the two boys with a shilling each. Nigel immediately went out and bought twelve queen-cakes, which he distributed amongst the household. Alick very contentedly munched the one that was given to him, then remarked, "You cannot eat your cake and have it," and invested his shilling in a wonderful imitation queen-cake, made of stone, which was frequently served up for tea to cheat unwary visitors, and which stood a monument for many years of Alick's thrift and Nigel's generosity.

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But to return to our story.

When Alick reached home, he communicated the fact that he had promised to spend the evening with Ollie. His father made no objection, only reminding him to be home in better time than he was before. Mrs. Medwin was half sorry that he should so often be absent from the family circle, half pleased that her boy should receive so much notice from one considerably his senior. She knew nothing of Ollie's misdemeanours; she had been pleased with his pleasant gentlemanly bearing whenever he had been at the house in quest of Alick, and she trusted that her son had sufficient right feeling to prevent him from choosing undesirable associates.

Mrs. Wayland had not forgotten her promise to Florence. She had called twice to see her, and had at last succeeded in carrying her off to Sedgemere to spend the day and to return the next morning. "We have hardly any one staying in the house," was her plea, "and I really want Florence."

So Florence, to her own delight, was allowed to go, and as Mrs. Wayland had come unexpectedly, and was in a hurry to return home again, Florence made her preparations for departure with more

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regard to haste than to order, leaving her bed-room a scene of dire confusion.

Alick passed the door on his way down stairs, and nearly stumbled over a slipper which Florence had thrown off, little heeding where it went. He made an impatient exclamation, and picked it up.

"I will play Miss Flo a trick with this," he said to himself. "I will hide it in her bed, and she may hunt all day before it comes to light."

He entered the bed-room, and looked round contemptuously on its disordered condition. He was never untidy himself, and would not allow Nigel to be so either in the room they shared together.

It was to be hoped that Florence's apartment was not an index to her mind. Muddle reigned pre-eminent; half-an-hour later Ann would have restored all to order, and Alick's eye for neatness would not have been so offended. In her anxiety not to keep Mrs. Wayland waiting, Florence seemed to have made a sort of Irish stew of all her possessions, of which the floor might be considered as the dish—clothes, trinkets, and valuables of various descriptions being thrown together, *en masse*, and presenting a remarkable conglomeration.

Her last act had been to seize her purse, open it

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hastily to examine its contents, and drop some on the floor. She thought she had picked up the missing money, but a glittering half-sovereign had rolled under the washing-stand, and was clearly visible to Alick.

"Ho! ho!" thought he; "this will serve my purpose better than the slipper; how abominably careless of Flo. It would serve her right if she lost it altogether."

He slipped it into his waistcoat-pocket, intending not to refund it till Florence had made some considerable outcry about it. Alick was rather fond of teasing his cousin, though he often had the worst of it, Florence possessing sufficient ability to turn the tables successfully.

As he took the road to Ollie's house, he turned over in his mind the best means of playing his trick; but his imagination, usually fertile, had not suggested anything very brilliant, before he came to the end of his walk, and in Ollie's society Florence and her half-sovereign were soon forgotten.

He remembered them again, later in the evening, when he found himself with his friend in a brilliantly lighted room, watching eagerly the rolling balls on the smooth, green table. Alick

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had a great desire to distinguish himself at billiards: it was no mere game of chance; it required a steady eye, a skilful hand, and plenty of practice. Above all, Ollie was a remarkably good player, which was a strong recommendation in the eyes of his satellite. He stood watching each stroke intently, quiet, as was his wont; his countenance expressive only of interest in the game, but all the time suffering from many secret misgivings.

Presently the billiard-marker came up to him, offering him a cue. Alick drew back, but Ollie patted him on the shoulder, saying, "Come, old fellow; there are not many people to laugh at your blunders—don't be afraid."

So Alick made his first attempt at billiard-playing rather nervously, found the long cue very much in his way, and was glad to resign it again, though he fancied he should enjoy the game thoroughly, if he only knew how to manage a little better. Soon bets began to circulate, and Alick rejoiced that he had been wise enough to leave his purse at home. Ollie laughed when he heard the excuse, and offered to be his banker, and Alick fidgetted with his fingers in his waistcoat pocket, as he was in the habit of doing when

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uneasy. Unlucky habit! That little gold coin of Florence's, which he had forgotten, was thereby brought to light almost unwittingly.

"You are welcome to leave your purse at home, Alick, so long as you bring its contents with you," said Ollie, drily; and Alick, not liking to explain, was drawn into risking the money, shilling by shilling, then into losing it altogether.

"It is very provoking," thought he, "but I can repay her, though it will pretty nearly exhaust my funds."

He took up his cap to go, wishing his friend good-night. Ollie was too much interested in play to take much heed of him, so Alick escaped.

The cool air was very refreshing after the over-heated atmosphere of the billiard-room, but his sensations of relief were dispelled ere he reached the bottom of the steps which formed the entrance to the Red Lion.

Passing just at that very moment was Nigel, who had been sent out by his father with some letters for the post. Alick stood still, hoping to remain unnoticed, but the glare of the lamps was full upon him, and Nigel gave a start of surprise as he recognised his brother.

"Why, Alick, who would have dreamt of seeing

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you here!" was his first exclamation. "Are you coming home now? I thought you were with Ollie?"

Alick saw no help for it, but to join his brother.

When the two boys stood together in the street below, Nigel linked his arm in Alick's—"I say, old fellow," he said, kindly, "what were you doing at the Red Lion? It is not the place for boys like us."

"Suppose you mind your own business, and leave me to take care of mine," replied Alick, trying to twist away; but Nigel held him fast, and made him stride rather quickly in the direction of home.

"Alick," he said, gravely, "you have been at the billiard-room with Ollie and his set—promise me you will never go there again."

"Leave me alone," was the impatient rejoinder. And Nigel continued, "I am no tell-tale, as you know, Alick; but if I find out that you go there again, I shall certainly tell my father."

"Very likely; it is not often you get such a chance of playing the good boy," said Alick. "Where's the harm in a game of billiards?"

"None at all, so far as the game is concerned; but you will find it expensive, unless you can

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manage to escape the betting, and I am content to believe that Papa knows what is best for us, for the present. If he says you may go to the Red Lion, well and good; but you will hardly venture to ask his leave, Alick."

Alick was silent for a minute, and then tried another tack.

"It is a splendid game. I wonder you never try, Nigel; you would make a first-rate player. Why don't you make the attempt?"

"I am afraid," said Nigel; and there was something so sad in his tone that Alick stopped involuntarily, and stared in his companion's face.

"Afraid!" he said; "well, I gave you credit for having more pluck; there is not much chance of your being found out."

"It is not that; I am afraid for myself," continued Nigel. "Alick, do not think I profess to be better than you are, because I do not go to those places. I often long to break away from all restraint, and be independent, as some boys are; but it would never do. I need authority to keep me in order at all, because I cannot take care of myself. I cannot trust myself to go a little way with Ollie's clique; it would tempt

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me into a great many things that we know to be wrong, and so it is best to steer clear of them altogether."

Alick looked surprised; he could not understand such an acknowledgment.

"If that is how you feel, perhaps you are right to keep away from such things," he said; "but it seems to me you are very weak, Nigel; and you will get strait-laced and narrow-minded, if you begin like that."

"Very true as to the weakness," replied Nigel, good-temperedly; "as to growing strait-laced and narrow-minded, I believe, out of consideration for my weakness, it will be the safest thing to do. But, Alick, I wish you would take my warning, and promise not to go to the Red Lion again."

"I can take care of myself, thank you," said Alick, drawing himself up; then altering his tone as he entered the hall-door with his brother, he added, "Nigel, it would not be like you to tell Papa; I never knew you to do such a thing before."

"I have told you what I mean to do," was Nigel's decided answer; "if I find you go there again, Papa will know of it. It rests with yourself."

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So ended the conversation, which both boys felt to be unsatisfactory. The reserve between the brothers had deepened; it troubled Nigel as he lay awake that night; he was ill at ease, both with himself and Alick,—with himself, because he knew that some jealousy and irritation were mixed with the desire to draw his brother away from Ollie's influence. He was anxious to save Alick from temptation, and yet he was conscious of baser motives mingling with the good ones. It was trying to find that he had so little hold on his brother; that threats alone could induce him to give up his dangerous amusement.

Nigel tossed and turned restlessly. "After all," he thought, "it is no affair of mine: if Alick will not take advice, it is not my fault; I am not responsible."

Then came other thoughts burning through Nigel's brain. Alick, if left alone, might be drawn on from one thing to another, till he became involved in serious trouble. If discovered, where would be his reputation? All his careful study would go for nothing—he would be disgraced in the school. Nigel actually found himself picturing Alick's downfall—his expulsion from the fifth form; and a momentary flash of triumph

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came over him, as he thought that Medwin, junior, would not always bear away all the laurels. The wickedness of the thought startled him, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling, he almost groaned, as he struggled against the impulses of his own sinful nature, which were warring so strongly within him. But Nigel could conquer self; his weapons were true, his armour strong, and his earnest prayer for help brought its quiet answer to his troubled mind.

Full of shame and contrition, Nigel looked towards the other bed, where the slanting moon-beams shone bright on Alick's sleeping face, and as he looked he made the inward resolution to be a true brother. How to act his part he knew not; the boys had been so long apart in thought and feeling, that Alick could hardly be touched by any show of affection. Many plans did Nigel revolve in his head that night, but at last they all grew confused, and the weary boy slept soundly.

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CHAPTER X.

MARGARET'S GRIEVANCES.

FLORENCE did not come back the next day, as had been arranged, but a note was brought from Sedgemere Hall to say that Mrs. Wayland had persuaded her to stay till the end of the week. Florence was a young lady of many wants, and her hastily written "billet" concluded with a list of various things which were to be packed up immediately, and sent to her by return of Colonel Wayland's dog-cart.

"Margaret, dear, will you help me to get Florence's requirements in order?" said Mrs. Medwin; "we have not much time allowed us."

Margaret rose rather unwillingly,—"It is just like Florence," she said, pettishly; "if she wants anything, she never seems to consider the trouble it gives other people."

Mrs. Medwin took no notice of the remark, but mounted quickly to Florence's room, and began her

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preparations, Margaret assisting, though not very energetically.

It was not a very easy task, though Florence had specified that what she wanted was to be found "somewhere in her drawers." The drawers were very full, and very untidy, and Mrs. Medwin's patience was somewhat tried, as she looked in every direction for missing articles, which were sure to appear in the least likely places.

At last all was finished, and the parcel ready and waiting in the hall, before the Sedgemere servant called for it. Then, and not till then, had Mrs. Medwin time to take compassion on Margaret's disconsolate face, which evidently craved for a little sympathy. "Poor Maggie," she said, "it is rather hard that you should not have your share in the fun."

Margaret snapped her eyes and blew her nose, and was very much disgusted with herself when she found slight symptoms of what Alick called "watercourses and canals" each side of her face.

"How would you like to read me some more of 'Marmion'?" continued her mother. "Since Florence has been with us, you have quite dropt your acquaintance with Sir Walter Scott."

Reading with Mamma used to be one of Mar-

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garet's great treats, but it seemed rather dull in comparison with Florence's gaieties; and though she fetched the book at once, the first few lines were read in such a lachrymose tone, that Mrs. Medwin thought the employment must be rather a penance than a pleasure.

"Is there anything you would like to do in preference, Maggie?" she asked, kindly.

"No, Mamma," replied Margaret, in her most dispirited manner; but she did not continue her reading, nevertheless. For some seconds she seemed intent on sticking a pin in and out of the tablecloth, her sole aim being apparently to make it always enter at precisely the same place.

"A penny for your thoughts, Maggie," said Mrs. Medwin, smiling; "I should be glad to hear them before you have worn a very large hole in the cloth."

Margaret started.

"I was thinking," she said, "that Florence will find it very hard to settle to lessons when Miss Dacre comes."

"And Margaret will find it very easy, I suppose," said Mrs. Medwin; "in that case you are better off than your cousin."

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Margaret did not seem disposed to appreciate her advantages, but pursued her first idea.

"Florence says she used to do just what she liked with Miss Carter. Do you think she will have her own way with Miss Dacre, Mamma?"

"Indeed, I cannot tell; I hope Miss Dacre's 'way' and Florence's will be the same. Why should you be so anxious about it, Maggie?"

"I don't know, but I cannot imagine Florence in the schoolroom being teased with lessons. She will not like it, I am sure. I can just fancy her face, if she has to write an exercise over again; she will think herself so victimised."

"You will have to be very industrious yourself, Maggie, or you will hardly be able to compete with Florence; she has excellent abilities."

"Yes, but she does not like work; and, oh, Mamma! do you know," continued Margaret, warming with her subject, "there were two words spelt wrongly in her note to-day? Can you believe it possible that a girl of fifteen does not know how to spell?"

"It was probably an oversight—the note was very hastily written," replied Mrs. Medwin; "but, Maggie, what makes you so hard on Florence this

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morning? Is it because she is having some pleasure you cannot join in?"

Margaret blushed. "Don't you think, Mamma," she said, "that Mrs. Wayland might have asked me, too?"

"If she had done so, I am not at all sure that I should have allowed you to go," replied Mrs. Medwin, quietly.

"Oh, Mamma! why not?" cried Margaret—the tears, which seemed very near the surface that morning, rising again to her eyes.

"Because Mrs. Wayland would only have asked you from a certain sense of politeness; you know if Florence were not here, you would never think of being invited."

"No, Mamma; but still it seems strange that Flo should visit there, and I should not; you would not allow me to accept invitations that did not include Florence."

"Perhaps not, but the case is different. Florence does not go beyond her own circle in visiting with Mrs. Wayland; you would, and I do not think it would be altogether for your comfort, dear Maggie."

Margaret again set to work with her pin, and gave herself a violent prick with it, which added

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some acrimony to her next speech. "I cannot see what is the use of all these absurd distinctions of society," she said; "I should think I am quite as good a companion for Kate and Adelaide Wayland, as Florence; people ought to be classed according to their worth, not according to their purses, or their position."

"I am afraid we cannot alter the way of the world," replied Mrs. Medwin; "the only thing is, Maggie, to learn with St. Paul, 'In whatsoever state we are, therewith to be content'—it will save us many a little vexation."

"It is a very difficult thing to do," said Margaret; "I do not envy grand people generally, but I do not understand why my own cousin should be considered more of a young lady than I am."

"I do not think you need trouble your head about the matter, Maggie, nor should you grudge Florence her pleasure; you have some which she cannot enjoy. All things considered, would you change places with her?"

"Oh, Mamma! oh, no!" cried Margaret, earnestly; "why, I have you and Nigel, and live at home with you all, and Flo is obliged to leave her papa. Oh, no, Mamma! I would not change for all the most delightful visits in the world."

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"Then, as you have come to that satisfactory conclusion, will you find something to do, Maggie?" said her mother; "cannot you make yourself useful in some way? It will not cause you to be at all less of a young lady."

"Shall I put Florence's drawers tidy for her?" said Maggie; "they need it."

"Yes, it will be doing her a kindness," replied Mrs. Medwin, and away went Margaret, satisfied in her own mind that her self-inflicted task was somewhat of an atonement for her previous ungenerous feeling towards her cousin.

After all, she did not miss Florence so much as she had expected. It was very pleasant to have a companion to share all her pursuits, but it had served to cut her off a little from Nigel's society. Florence very much liked to have a retainer constantly by her side—she and Margaret were generally very good friends, except when Florence exacted a little too much, or when Margaret was especially aggrieved by some proof of her cousin's selfishness. Still, even then, Florence's winning manner and apparent good nature soon made amends, but she did not allow Margaret to desert her, and spend whole afternoons in Nigel's bedroom, her favourite resort in holiday time.

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Nigel had his own diversions, and did not miss his sister very much; but the holidays were drawing to a close, and he was willing to give up a few amusements with his schoolfellows, in order to spend some of his time with Maggie.

Like other lords of the creation, he was a little conscious of his power; and in return for the benefit of his society, he insisted that Margaret should go with him to make his weekly visit to Aunt Jane. Margaret grumbled a little. She would greatly have preferred either a long walk, or a quiet *tête-à-tête* at home with her brother; but Nigel was very determined, so there was nothing for it, but to submit with as good a grace as she could command.

As usual, the twins found plenty to talk about. Margaret confided to her brother her troubles of the morning, and did not meet with all the sympathy she expected.

"If I were you, Maggie," said Nigel, "I would not care to go to Sedgemere. Florence fits in better there than you would."

"But I do not see why," persisted Margaret; "why should not I go?"

"I suppose Mrs. Wayland asks Flo because she is pretty, and that sort of thing," said Nigel, slowly.

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"I cannot think why it is that Florence looks differently to you, but she certainly does."

"Some people think I have better eyes than Florence," said Margaret, obliged to be her own trumpeter.

"I don't know that I ever looked at your eyes," continued Nigel, not knowing what an ungallant speech he was making; "but I do think Flo is the prettiest girl I ever saw."

"I believe you care a great deal more for her than you do for me," said poor Margaret.

"Now that is very silly of you, Maggie," was Nigel's rejoinder; "if you were very ugly indeed, I should love you as much as ever. I never think whether you are plain or pretty; indeed, if I were asked, I think I should not know what to say. Never mind, old girl," he continued, as Margaret still looked rather dismayed; "you are more useful than Flo, though I must allow you are less ornamental."

Margaret was not much consoled. She was just arriving at the age when personal vanity generally buds forth, and she had a lurking conviction that she was rather good-looking than otherwise. It was painful not to have the impression confirmed, but, after all, boys were no judges, and she

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treasured up in her mind a remark she had once overheard in favour of hazel eyes, which had comforted her ever since, when smarting under a sense of inferiority to her more brilliant cousin.

Aunt Jane was rather better than usual, and Margaret was a little astonished both at the kindly welcome with which Nigel was greeted, and also at the easy manner in which he talked to his aunt. It was always a difficult matter for Margaret to find topics of conversation; she imagined that she and Aunt Jane had very little in common. Presently they touched on Florence and her gaieties.

"And what do you think, Auntie?" said Nigel; "here is Margaret quite unhappy because she can't go too." Margaret frowned and gave Nigel a pinch, which made him turn round rather sharply: "It is no use for you to do that, Maggie," he said. "Aunt Jane, tell her she is much better off at home."

"It would be no good, my dear," said Aunt Jane; "Margaret would not believe me if I did. Truths like that are only learnt by experience. *I* am glad, however; for if Margaret had gone to Sedgemere, she certainly could not have come here."

"I should think you never said a truer word in your life, Aunt," said Nigel, laughing.

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"Would you like to know another of Margaret's grievances? She wants to be pretty."

Margaret was up in arms directly—"Oh, Nigel, how can you talk so! I am sure I said nothing of the kind."

"It is a very common wish, Maggie," said Aunt Jane; "I don't see why you should be so ashamed of it; it is natural."

"But, indeed, Aunt, Nigel is only talking nonsense," continued Margaret; "I cannot think what he means by being so absurd."

"Never mind, Maggie," said Nigel, enjoying her discomfiture, "you know you think you have pretty eyes, and if that be your opinion, it cannot much matter about other people's."

"Nigel, don't be such a tease," said Aunt Jane. "Margaret, we won't take any notice of him; he laughs at me sometimes, and now you are here he makes fun of you. He had better have some gingerbread to keep him quiet.—Go and ask Lucy for some, Nigel."

Away went Nigel, and when he was gone Aunt Jane continued, "Once upon a time I was a pretty girl myself, Maggie; and I found that though it was very pleasant for some things, it had its disadvantages. I used to waste so much time looking

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at myself. I did a great deal more work after I had the small-pox."

"Was that when you became—" "Ugly," Margaret was going to say, but she stopped short.

"Yes, I lost my good looks then, and I grieved for them very much at first. Depend upon it, Maggie, if you are not beautiful, it is because beauty would have been a temptation to you. It is very pleasant to be admired, but it is dangerous too, my dear."

"I don't care for that, but I want to be loved," said Margaret, looking very earnest; "every one loves Flo—they cannot help it."

"And why should they not like you, Margaret? You are by no means repulsive in your appearance; indeed, when you have outgrown the awkward age, I think you will be sufficiently attractive. You must not have foolish fancies, child."

"People do not care for me, as they do for Florence," said Margaret; "even Nigel makes far more fuss with her, than he does with me."

"Perhaps he may outwardly; but no one can take your place in his heart, so do not be afraid of that. If you want a recipe for winning affection, Maggie, I can give you one—to forget all about your own feelings, and busy yourself with minister-

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ing to other people's happiness. Only you must not do it in the hope of gaining love. Unless your motive be unselfish, you will fail in the end."

"There's so little I can do," said Maggie.

"Keep your eyes open, and the opportunities will come. Listening to your troubles has made me forget mine, so you have done some good already. I wonder what other kind thing you have done to-day!"

"I put Florence's drawers tidy for her," said Margaret, laughing.

"That was kind too, though she ought to be made to keep them neat herself," said Aunt Jane. "And after all, Maggie, you have a great deal of love to keep you warm. You can hardly know the true meaning of the word 'lonely.' Is it the kind of love that Mrs. Wayland bestows on Florence, which you want?"

"They make a great fuss with her at Sedgemere," said Margaret.

"And that cannot be very good for her: it would be trying for you too, Margaret. When Nigel has done tormenting Lucy, I will tell you a story of what happened to me some years ago, when I tried to create a sensation and failed."

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Nigel soon returned, with his pockets full of gingerbread nuts, and Aunt Jane began,—

"Your Uncle Charles, whom you never knew, was my very especial brother—he was next in age to myself, and I considered him as belonging peculiarly to me. Excellent friends we were generally, but like all boys, not excepting Nigel, he used sometimes to tease me dreadfully. I don't think he much appreciated my good looks; or, at any rate, he thought I valued them sufficiently myself, for he took some pains to cure me of my vanity. One day he was reading an account of the Japanese women improving their beauty by staining their eyebrows, and he suggested that some such process might be an embellishment to me. Like a silly girl, I was rather taken with the idea; and the next time some friends came to spend the evening, I took Charlie's paint-box from his room, and adorned myself with delicate Indian ink eyebrows, of the most bewitching description.

"Of course Charlie's sharp eyes soon discovered what I had been doing, but he made no observation, only every now and then gazing at me with a knowing air that made me blush. At last he took up the newspaper, and I thought I was to be left in peace; but he was only reserving the strength

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of his attack. Suddenly he began to read from the paper a fictitious paragraph, headed—'Warning to young ladies,' and stating that many people had lately suffered from endeavouring to dye their eyebrows and eyelashes; the effect given by the colouring matter being in several cases to produce ultimately a fine vermilion hue, instead of the tint desired. No one else suspected Charlie of inventing the account which he pretended to read, in a slow emphatic voice, but I grew so red in the face that your papa, who was one of the little boys then, cried out, 'Oh! look at Jennie, she must have been using the dye.' Everybody stared at me, and it was more than I could bear. I began to cry, and dashed out of the room to wash off my eyebrows. They certainly did look very red when I came downstairs again, and I had to endure a great deal of teasing. It was all the more vexatious, because I had wished to appear to particular advantage that evening, and our visitors did not admire the little *ruse* I had practised on them. Depend upon it, Maggie, there is such a thing as bestowing too much care on one's appearance."

"Mamma often says I don't take enough pains," said Margaret; "she sends me upstairs sometimes to smooth my hair."

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"It is every one's duty to look neat and tidy; ay, and perhaps to set themselves off to the best advantage in their power, provided always it does not absorb too much attention," said Aunt Jane; "even old Lucy knows that. She would not annoy me by coming into the room with a soiled apron for a great deal."

Margaret sat thoughtful, half busied in her own mind with pondering over her aunt's hints, half longing for some more reminiscences of former days, but these were not forthcoming. Nigel saw that his aunt was beginning to look tired, and after a little more desultory chat, the twins rose to take leave.

"Next week Miss Dacre is coming," said Margaret, just as they reached home, but she could not fully determine whether that event was to be considered as a grievance, or otherwise.

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CHAPTER XI.

MISS DACRE.

THE close of the week brought the holidays to a termination, and also brought Florence home from Sedgemere. She certainly looked the better for her visit—she seemed to have recovered all her old elasticity; and while the excitement of narrating her adventures was still fresh, she appeared more charming than ever. Margaret was delighted to have her back again, and the two girls enjoyed their chat over the fire in Florence's bedroom, for Florence had been accustomed to consider a fire as indispensable during the cold weather.

Florence did not dread Miss Dacre's arrival nearly so much as Margaret. She had been used at home to the superintendence of an easy, good-natured governess, who had allowed her to do pretty much as she liked, and she was rather pleased at the thought of seeing a fresh face. "I hope Miss Dacre will be clever at fancy work," she said; "I want to make something for a present

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for Mrs. Wayland, and I am sure I shall never have enough patience, unless I get a little help."

"You won't ask Miss Dacre to do it for you, surely," said Margaret; "I should not care to give my friends anything that some one else had done for me."

"No, silly child; of course not," returned Florence, patting her cousin's cheek. "I shall not *ask* Miss Dacre; she will most probably offer to do it for me when she sees me quite worn out with my efforts. I think I shall work a banner-screen; Kate has just made a fright. I should like to show that I can do something better. By-the-bye, Maggie," she continued, "did you find any money of mine rolling about on the floor after I left last Monday? I am sure I have lost some, and I shall want it to buy materials for this lovely work."

"We did not see any," said Margaret. "How much was it?"

"Half-a-sovereign, I think," returned Florence, carelessly. "I wonder whether Ann is honest?"

"Oh, yes! perfectly so," said Margaret. "She has been here two years, and we have never missed anything. If she had found it, she would have brought it to Mamma directly."

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"I am not so sure of that," said Florence, indifferently; "however, we can ask her about it;" and she put her hand on the bell as she spoke.

"Oh! stop a minute," cried Margaret, "Mamma does not like us to ring, unless it is for anything very particular. Ann has a great deal to do, and is not very well just now, so we try to spare her much running up and down stairs. She will be bringing in tea soon, so we may as well speak to her in the dining-room."

Florence laughed. "I wonder what you would say to Kate and Addie; they do nothing but ring bells from morning to night. It is very pleasant to have a maid with nothing to do but to wait on one."

"I wish we could manage to have that here for you, Flo," said Margaret, good-naturedly; and the girls then went down stairs.

It was a damp, miserable afternoon; too wet for the boys to stay out till the last minute, as they were rather too fond of doing. Even Florence, with all the attractions of Sedgemere fresh in her mind, could not help thinking that the family group looked very comfortable, clustered round the fire. There was Mamma enjoying a few minutes' rest in the dim light, with Harry and

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Donald on either side, full of importance at the thought of beginning their school-life next week, for Miss Dacre was not to have the charge of the little boys, in order that Florence and Margaret might have the full benefit of her undivided attention. Opposite to Mamma sat Nigel with little Beatrix on his knee, intent on playing "Open Sesame" with her brother's watch. And down on the hearth-rug squatted Alick, trying to catch enough light to read a few seconds longer, in spite of the warning that he would wear out his eyes. In another moment Bee was hoisted on Nigel's shoulder, while he found seats for the girls, and Florence was soon recapitulating all that had taken place at Sedgemere during the past week. When Ann appeared with the tea-tray her thoughts at once reverted to her missing half-sovereign, and, stopping rather hastily in the midst of one of her narratives, she said,—

"Ann, did you pick up any money in my room, after I went away last Monday?"

The suddenness of the address rather confounded poor Ann, who was not very strong, and who, feeling that she was looked at, coloured deeply.

"No, Miss," she replied; "I did not see any."

"It is very strange," said Florence; "I re-

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member perfectly dropping some out of my purse, just before starting. I thought I had picked it all up again, but half-a-sovereign must have rolled away somewhere."

"I think you must be mistaken, dear," said Mrs. Medwin; "your room was thoroughly swept and turned out while you were away, and if the money had been there, it must have come to light."

"I went into Miss Florence's room to make it neat, about three-quarters of an hour after she went," said Ann, "and I did not see any then, or the next day either, when I was sweeping."

Alick looked up rather curiously from his book. "Perhaps it rolled through a crack in the floor, Flo," he said.

"I don't know, I am sure," was Florence's reply. "I do not think there are any cracks in my room; I have never seen any. It is very unsatisfactory to lose money like that."

"Very so, indeed," said Mrs. Medwin; "we must inquire a little further into the matter. Ann shall look again to-morrow. Such a tiny coin might easily roll away and remain unnoticed."

"More probably Flo has spent it, and forgotten to put it down in her account book. Pray do you keep that as tidily as you do everything else

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belonging to you, Florence?" said Alick, still resolved that his cousin should pay some penalty for her carelessness.

"I only know that I have a very long reckoning to settle with you," returned Florence. "I had no horrid boys to tease me at Sedgemere. I should not be at all surprised to hear that you had hidden my half-sovereign away somewhere, Alick."

Her surmise came much nearer the truth than she had any idea of: it had the effect of quieting Alick, who, profiting by the freshly lighted gas, took up his book again.

"Mamma," asked Donald, "why did Ann become so rosy when Florence asked about her money?"

But Mamma was busy counting her spoonfuls of tea, and did not answer the question. Margaret and Nigel looked at each other, but made no remark, till they rose to take their places round the tea-table; then Nigel said in a low voice to his sister,—

"I am sure Ann would not take it—don't let anyone suspect her of it, Maggie."

And Maggie nodded sagaciously, as if she felt that the opinion of the twins could not fail to settle the point either way.

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Little more was said about Florence's loss that evening; it did not weigh very heavily on the young lady's mind; for, as she said, "More was to be had where that came from." But her aunt resolved quietly not to let the subject drop without some investigation. She herself looked carefully in every nook and corner of Florence's room for the missing coin, and she asked one or two questions, to be more fully assured in her own mind that Florence had really dropped it. As to that part of the story Florence was positive. She had looked in her purse in the morning before leaving Wykeham, and she had looked again when she reached Sedgemere; then it was that she had discovered her loss; she had intended to mention it when she wrote to announce that her visit would be prolonged, but the note was dispatched in a hurry, and she only remembered her half-sovereign when her messenger was halfway on the road to Wykeham. As for Alick, he saw no harm, or rather would see none, in making Florence wait for her money. It was not very convenient to begin the half-year with an empty purse, and that would be his fate if he restored his cousin's property directly. In a little time his own stores would be replenished, and then it

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would be very easy to tell Flo of the trick he had played upon her. Alick did not have any scruples of conscience: what he planned was generally right in his own eyes, because he was accustomed to consult only his own will and judgment; and, provided a certain course of action was deemed by him to be expedient, it was all he considered. This expediency had kept him out of many scrapes, but if his reputation was untarnished, his conscience was not; he had lost much of the sense of honour which home training had endeavoured to instil; and this loss had been so gradual that Alick himself was quite unaware of it, and would have declared as boldly as ever that the name of Medwin had never been sullied by any mean action.

On Monday morning inquiries were renewed, and fresh search was made, but of course unavailingly. Poor Ann was quite distressed. Miss Florence gave her more trouble than any one else in the house, and she feared now that the young lady's carelessness might be the means of casting some imputation on her character. Ann was a quiet, timid girl, and she went about her work with a sad, subdued manner, as if the thought of the missing half-sovereign weighed heavily upon her.

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She would gladly have paid the money out of her hardly earned wages, to be able to dismiss the subject from her mind, but that could not be. She could only wait patiently, hoping that time would solve the mystery. It caused Ann much more distress than it did Florence, who, after relieving her feelings with a little grumbling and a few insinuations about "servants not being always trustworthy," wrote to ask her papa to supply her financial necessities, and thought very little more about the matter.

The eagerly expected Miss Dacre arrived in due time, and Mrs. Medwin pitied her for having to undergo an inspection from such a phalanx of curious eyes; but Miss Dacre, though a very little person (shorter than either of her pupils, to Margaret's intense delight), did not seem overpowered. Her lively black eyes shot back inquiring glances at the children, more especially at the boys. She seemed quite sorry to think that Harry and Donald were not to be under her care, but consoled herself with observing to Florence, "Then we shall be able to work all the harder."

Florence smiled in that pretty gracious way that attracted every one who came in contact with her, and said she was longing to begin her studies again.

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"And, Margaret, you wish it too, do you not?" said Miss Dacre; but Margaret only looked rather awkward, and answered,—

"I don't know," and was glad to leave the burden of the conversation to her mamma and cousin.

Florence made great progress that evening in forming a friendship with Miss Dacre, and went to bed quite content at having made a fresh conquest. She would have been more pleased still, if she could have peeped into the letter that Miss Dacre sent home to her mother the next day. It contained a very cheerful, rose-coloured description of everything and everybody, but Florence made the prettiest picture of all, and no wonder! The little governess had a keen appreciation of the beautiful, and Florence's graceful figure and lovely face had made a deep impression; for that very reason, because she felt herself most drawn to her elder pupil, she conscientiously paid a good deal of attention to the younger one, and Margaret, well pleased at not finding herself neglected, responded somewhat shyly to Miss Dacre's advances.

The commencement promised well both for teacher and taught, and the new *régime* seemed

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likely to give satisfaction. Very energetically did the girls begin their studies, so much so that Nigel inquired anxiously "if Margaret intended to aim at blue stockingism?" while Alick made allusions to "new brooms," which it was to be hoped Miss Dacre did not understand.

Such an industrious fit had seldom visited the house before, except as far as Alick was concerned. To the boys' horror an attempt was made to confine all conversation to the French language. Miss Dacre had been partly educated in Paris, and it was a great delight to her to discuss that most eventful part of her otherwise monotonous life with her pupils; and when once mounted on this her favourite topic, her thoughts flowed very freely in the foreign tongue, while Florence and Margaret did their best to understand and reply. They were seized with a French mania, and endeavoured to extort fines for every English word spoken by themselves, the two elder boys, and even Mrs. Medwin. Papa, too, rashly allowed a few words of Anglo-French to escape him one day, and was thereby drawn within the pale, great fun being caused by his attempts to revive his recollection of some almost forgotten lessons, taken when a young man, arduous for self-improvement.

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He was very dauntless, and on the strength of a few badly pronounced substantives and verbs, which never agreed in number and person, he would plunge boldly into the most abstruse subjects, steering his way through countless errors, and when quite at a loss giving an elegant French termination to his English syllables in a highly impressive manner.

The boys rebelled of course. Alick would mutter "women's nonsense," and bury himself afresh in his study of the dead languages, which he thought far more worthy of attention than the living.

Nigel, sturdy John Bull that he was, made grimaces when the strange sounds reached his ears.

"You had better profit while you have the opportunity," said his father; "I often wish I had had such advantages. A knowledge of French would be useful in the business, so if Miss Dacre is inclined to give you any instruction, Nigel, pray avail yourself of it."

Nigel was not at all grateful either to his father for the proposal, or to Miss Dacre for her ready accession to the request; and he privately resolved not to forward any such design, though Margaret,

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full of delight at the idea of working with her brother, was anxious at once to plan an evening reading-class.

"No, indeed, I have no time for that," was the somewhat indignant rejoinder; and away marched Nigel with his books, to his own room, where Alick had already installed himself, "to get rid of the terrible din," as he politely styled the conversation downstairs.

Poor little Miss Dacre! she almost regretted that her own pupils had begun with such zeal, when she found that it prevented any chance of popularity with the boys, who shunned her on every occasion, fearful of an avalanche of French; Harry and Donald following the example of their elders, and regarding the governess as a species of wild animal with claws, who was decidedly best at a distance.

Beatrix, however, was desirous of emulating the young ladies, and it became one of her chief amusements to establish herself in a large arm-chair with a book, reading what *she* called "Flench," and other people "double Dutch."

Amongst all her other pursuits, Florence did not forget her present for Mrs. Wayland. A post-office order from her papa provided her with ample

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means for procuring the materials, and the work promised to be handsome. For one whole evening Florence was enraptured with it, and could hardly be persuaded to go to bed, so anxious was she for its completion. Then came a lull in her excitement—the pattern was complicated—would Miss Dacre tell her how it was to be done?

Miss Dacre was very obliging,—showed Florence where her mistake was, and even offered to unpick it and rectify the error. That done, Florence took her work in hand again with diminished ardour.

"How very nicely you have done that little piece, Miss Dacre; much better than I can do it," she said.

"Practice makes perfect," returned Miss Dacre; "you will soon succeed as well as I do."

"It is very pleasant work, do you not think so?" said Florence, meditatively.

"Yes, very," replied Miss Dacre, unwarily. "I should quite enjoy doing it."

"Would you?" said Florence, eagerly. "I am sure I should be much obliged to you for a little help. I want very much to have it finished for Mrs. Wayland's birthday, but I am afraid that is almost impossible now we have so many lessons to do."

"When is the birthday?" asked Miss Dacre.

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"Not for another month," Florence was obliged to own; "but the banner-screen must be made up."

"I am sure you can finish it very well in that time," said Miss Dacre, "if you are industrious."

Florence sighed and said no more, but she looked very pathetic when summoned to read history that afternoon, and glanced alternately from Miss Dacre to her work without offering to fold it up.

"Venez donc, ma chère, nous vous attendons," said Miss Dacre; and Florence, not having sufficient French at command for such an occasion, replied,—

"Miss Dacre, I was going to ask if you would be so very kind as to do some of my work while we are reading."

"No, dear," was the reply; and Florence felt there was no evading the refusal. "I think if you make a present, it ought to be one of your own doing; Mrs. Wayland would not estimate my work as she would yours, and I know you cannot wish to palm off my productions as your own."

Florence was not accustomed to such plain speaking; the colour mounted to her cheek, and her eyes flashed, though she said nothing. As she took her seat by Margaret, the latter, who had

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been much amused with the result of her cousin's fishing, whispered, "You did not manage quite so nicely as you expected, Flo."

"I don't know what you mean," retorted Florence, with an offended air.

"Only that you have just made a thorough failure," said Margaret, in the same low key.

"You are exceedingly rude," returned Florence aloud, and Miss Dacre, who all this time was waiting for the girls to begin, inquired what was the matter.

"Margaret is very silly, that is all," said Florence, taking up the book, and beginning to read rapidly and indistinctly. Perhaps Miss Dacre had heard more than she wished to confess, but she did not make any further remark. For a few minutes Florence read on, then Margaret interrupted—

"Miss Dacre, are we to write an abstract of this?"

The answer was in the affirmative.

"Because," continued Margaret, "I cannot understand a word that Florence is reading, and she holds the book so that I cannot see either."

"I think we had better begin again," said Miss Dacre, cheerfully. "Florence, will you read first, or shall Margaret?"

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"There is no necessity for beginning again that I can see," returned Florence, who was thoroughly out of temper. "Margaret should be more attentive."

Miss Dacre took the book quietly from her pupil's hand.

"Florence, this is very childish," she said; "I am very glad none of the younger ones are here."

Florence shrugged her shoulders, and Miss Dacre seeing that this was not the time for remonstrance, passed the book to Margaret, and told her to go on reading.

With a little feeling of superiority, which betrayed itself in her manner, Margaret obeyed. She read very carefully, and her clear distinct tones were a contrast to the impatient, hurried way in which Florence had just been indulging. They served to increase her cousin's dudgeon, and the amount of attention bestowed on Macaulay that afternoon gave no promise of a satisfactory *résumé* from Florence. As soon as the afternoon duties were finished, she retreated to her own room, still with an air of offended dignity, leaving Margaret to put away the books.

"Florence is not very good-tempered, is she, Miss Dacre?" said Margaret.

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"I have hardly had time to find out," was the quiet reply.

"Do you know what made her so angry?" began Margaret, but she was checked.

"I think I can guess, though I would rather not hear," said Miss Dacre. "Margaret, dear, you seem rather pleased than otherwise, that I did not help Florence."

Margaret blushed.

"You said that people ought not to depend on the help of others when they give presents," she began, but Miss Dacre's black eyes looked as if the excuse were a paltry one, and Margaret's natural sincerity brought forth the avowal. "I think I am pleased when Florence does wrong, because she is so seldom blamed, and I so often am."

"It is not a right feeling, Maggie," said Miss Dacre, kindly.

"No, Aunt Jane says it is not, and Nigel too, and Mamma," said Maggie; "of course I know it is not; the difficulty is how to prevent it."

"How are we to prevent sin of all kinds?" said Miss Dacre, gently.

Margaret looked down.

"I know what you mean," she replied; "but,

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Miss Dacre, I cannot pray about such little things as that, it seems almost irreverent."

"Not if you consider it in the right light. You must own that jealousy and envy are sins; and, trifling as they may seem to you, they will gain the mastery over you, till you use the right means of conquering them. And, Maggie dear," continued Miss Dacre, "is there not some selfishness too? If you loved your cousin as yourself, would you not rejoice in her being so universally attractive, and would you not do all in your power to soothe her when she is ruffled, instead of irritating her as you did this afternoon?"

"I think I am always doing wrong, Miss Dacre," said Margaret, bursting into tears. "You do not know how often I am selfish and unkind. I am afraid you will not love me at all when you know me better."

Miss Dacre put her arm round Margaret's waist. "Dear Maggie," she whispered, "doing wrong makes you very unhappy; do not you ever determine to do better?"

"I try, and fail," said Margaret, with eyes still downcast.

"And why do you fail?" asked Miss Dacre.

"I don't know," was the faint reply.

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"When you first begin to try, you ask God's help, do you not, Maggie?"

"Yes," was the answer, given in a very low voice.

"And do you go on asking for it, or, after a time, do you grow careless and forget?"

There was no reply, but Margaret's pressure of her governess' hand told that the question had been aptly put.

"Well, Margaret," said Miss Dacre, after a pause, "we must get ready for tea. I think you know the cause of your failures; everyone is tried in the same way, but you must not forget to use the remedy."

And in her heart Margaret prayed that she might not.

Florence was not nearly so accessible as Margaret. She had left the room full of ill-feeling, both against Miss Dacre and her cousin; but a few minutes' solitude had convinced her that her ebullition of temper was undignified; and as she was anxious not to weaken the favourable impression Miss Dacre had evidently formed of her, she resumed her former caressing manner, and met her governess as if nothing had occurred. Miss Dacre would have spoken seriously to her, but Florence's

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kiss, and offer to carry her basket upstairs for her, were so irresistible, and bespoke such an evident desire to waive the subject, that Miss Dacre was silenced. She did not feel quite so happy that night in the retrospection of the events of the day; she could see that it would be very difficult to gain a right influence over Florence, and she perceived also how greatly her powers of fascination were likely to mislead her. Margaret with all her faults had the sincerity to own them, and the wish to subdue them; she was a more hopeful subject to work upon.

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CHAPTER XII.

NIGEL ASTRAY.

DR. WARD was very solicitous for the welfare of his boys. Some people thought his plans too varied, but if he changed them frequently it was from no capricious motive, and when he was thoroughly persuaded of their success they were steadily adhered to. One of his latest innovations was the opening of a reading-room, where, besides a good library, various amusements were provided for the boys. The Doctor had cause to think that some of his pupils did not choose either their society or their employments so wisely as he could wish, and he had a desire to furnish them with, at least, harmless pursuits. He was not altogether successful. For a time the boys were pleased with the novelty, but there was not enough excitement for the more daring spirits, and Dr. Ward had still suspicions that the Red Lion proved a strong attraction -- suspicions, but at present nothing more. Mr. Marsden, a short-sighted under-master,

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whose lodgings were near the Red Lion, had fancied several times that he had seen boys with familiar faces, going and coming from the inn; but they did not wear the cap and gown of the Wykeham grammar scholars, and Mr. Marsden could identify no one without his glasses, which he constantly mislaid. He mentioned the circumstance once or twice to Dr. Ward, and the result was that one morning the head-master addressed the boys on the subject,—told them that for the future they would be carefully watched, and placed visits to the Red Lion under penalty of severe punishment.

The speech caused much discussion amongst the boys; it was very unusual for the Doctor to interfere with them out of school-hours; if he did so, it was rather to promote sport than to spoil it, and even some of the better-disposed lads resented the Doctor's words as encroaching on their liberty of action. Those for whom they really were intended grumbled amongst themselves, but deemed it easy to evade discovery, and perhaps the prohibition gave greater zest to their enjoyment of this forbidden pleasure.

Neither of the Medwins mentioned the subject at home, nor did they speak of it to each other. Nigel knew that Alick would not like admonitions

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from him, and hoped that Dr. Ward's warning would prove a sufficient safeguard. He knew but little of Alick's proceedings, for the reserve between the brothers did not diminish, and they had but little time together, now that Alick was in a higher form.

It was a damp, chilly evening in February; Nigel and Alick had retreated to their own room to study, for the girls, with Mamma and Miss Dacre, were chatting too fast in the dining-room for lessons to progress well. Florence was in high spirits; she was going next day to Sedgemere, to spend Mrs. Wayland's birthday. She had not completed her banner-screen, but she had bought a very pretty one ready worked, which she intended to present. It only needed the addition of some tassels, which she was sewing on, when a note was brought to her. It proved to be from Adelaide Wayland, who knew of Florence's intention, and who wrote to say that they were arranging their gifts round an elegant *épergne*—the Colonel's present to his wife—would Florence like to send hers back by the man-servant, to be placed with the others?

"Tell him to wait a minute," said Florence, as she finished reading the note; "I shall soon have

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done this." But Charles had certainly forgotten that he was to take back an answer, he was already gone.

"How provoking!" cried Florence; "I should so like to have sent it."

She stood thinking for a minute, then sat down again, took up her work, and soon finished it off. When it had been duly admired, and neatly done up in white paper, she ran upstairs with it, and tapped lightly at Nigel's door.

Nigel quickly answered her summons, and Florence quietly closed the door again, so that Alick could not hear her request.

"Nigel, I want you to do something for me," she said; "I want this parcel to go to Sedgemere this evening. Colonel Wayland's servant is in the town, but I think he has forgotten to call for it. Do run out and look for him. You will be sure to meet him, if you go a little way on the Sedgemere road."

"It is such a wretched evening, Flo, and I have not done my lessons," was Nigel's reply.

"It does not rain now," pleaded Florence; "oh! do be obliging, dear Nigel. I would not ask you unless I wanted it very particularly."

"Well, I will try at any rate," said Nigel, always

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ready to do a service when it lay in his power. He took up the parcel, and ran downstairs, followed by Florence's expression of gratitude.

"You are the most good-natured fellow I ever knew," she said; "remember, I shall be delighted if you can succeed in sending it to Sedgemere."

Florence returned to the dining-room not a little elated at having dispatched her parcel, though she resolved not to mention how she had sent it.

The boys' lessons were always considered of primary importance, and no one ventured to disturb them. Nigel, especially, was to be guarded against interruptions; it was always difficult for him to settle steadily to work, and Mamma often allowed him a fire upstairs in order that he might have all the benefit of quietude, when she would not have thought of having one in her own room. The fire was not of much advantage to either of the boys that evening, for soon after Nigel's departure Alick slipped out quietly. He was not so particular as usual in selecting the right cap, for he left the house in a scarlet flannel cricket cap belonging to his brother, one of Margaret's manufacture, with the initials "N. M." embroidered in black braid on the top. Just about nine o'clock Alick returned; he crept stealthily up to his room,

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and remained there till the supper bell rang. He looked so pale that Mrs. Medwin felt anxious about him, and feared he had been studying too long. She did not know where he had spent part of the evening.

Nigel was still out, and no one seemed to know what had become of him. Florence might have told, but she did not wish to acknowledge that she had been the means of calling him away from his lessons. She had not asked him to keep out so late, she argued; he surely must have met the Sedgemere servant long before this. Florence could not help thinking it possible that he was carrying her parcel himself all the way to Colonel Wayland's; if so, he might well be late; but what an evening for such a walk—dark and damp and cold!—Florence began to wish that Nigel had been a little less obliging.

It seemed no use waiting for him, so supper began, every one feeling more or less uncomfortable. Mr. and Mrs. Medwin were vexed with Nigel for being out so late. Margaret was anxious and unhappy at his disappearance. Florence tried in vain to convince herself that she was not the cause of his delay, and Alick was either feeling unwell or was greatly depressed from some cause

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or other. He ate nothing, and seemed glad to go to bed, declaring that he was quite well, but felt very tired. His mother would have followed him, and inquired more fully into his ailments, if her thoughts had not been so taken up with her eldest boy.

Supper over, Mr. Medwin announced his intention of going to look for Nigel. The girls lingered for some minutes after he had started, then wished Mrs. Medwin "good night." Margaret allowed Florence to leave the room first; then said, "Oh, Mamma, let me know when Nigel comes home. I shall not be asleep."

"Very well, dear, I will send him to your door to wish you good night," replied her mother, trying to smile hopefully. "I hope he will not do so again, Maggie. It vexes Papa and me very much."

"Mamma, I do not think it is Nigel's fault," pleaded the twin sister.

"I hope not—good night, dear Maggie;" and Margaret felt that she must not stay any longer. She undressed slowly and lay down, resolved to keep awake till she heard her brother's voice. The house was still for some time, and Margaret was beginning to feel very drowsy, when the noise of the hall-door opening roused her half-dormant

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faculties. She slipped on her dressing-gown and peeped out. She could see nothing, and hear but little ;—certainly Nigel could not have returned.

She could just hear the hum of voices proceeding from the dining-room; her father's low and stern, her mother's pleading and anxious. What could be the matter?

At any other time Margaret would not have played the part of listener; now, her only anxiety was to learn what had become of Nigel. She seated herself on the stairs, her forehead pressed against the railings, her powers of hearing strained to the utmost; still, all that she could hear were a few unconnected words. "His red cap," were the first words she caught. Then she missed a little more, and again heard the sentence, "The waiter at the Red Lion said it was young Medwin—that he was often there."

Margaret heard something that sounded almost like a sob. Could Mamma be crying? or what could have happened to Nigel? She listened again—then heard, "Mr. Marsden injured for life." Was Nigel hurt, she asked herself? The suspense could be borne no longer. She ran downstairs, and stood breathless before her father and mother.

"My poor Maggie," said Mr. Medwin, and he

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put his arm round the shivering girl, "you must comfort your mother, my dear, for I must go out again to look for Nigel."

"Where is he? Oh! Papa, is he hurt?"

"No, my dear, I hope not; but he is in sad trouble—such trouble as I hoped our Nigel would never have known; and now we cannot tell where he is."

Margaret looked from father to mother with despairing inquiry. Mr. Medwin kissed her, whispered, "Take care of Mamma, darling," and left them alone.

As the house door closed once more, Margaret knelt down by her mother's side, and said in a low voice, "Mamma, how can I help you? What has happened?"

Mrs. Medwin looked up, and Margaret thought she had never before seen such a careworn expression on her face; she seemed to have aged years since Margaret had wished her good-night an hour or two ago.

"Some of the grammar boys have been playing billiards at the Red Lion," she said: "Dr. Ward had forbidden it, and to-night Mr. Marsden followed them there. One of the elder boys knocked him down. The boys escaped, but Mr. Marsden

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was very much hurt; he fell against the table, and it has caused concussion of the brain."

"But Nigel, Mamma?" said Maggie.

"He was there, Margaret. He left his red cap behind him when he ran away."

"Oh! Mamma, I do not believe it. It can't be true," cried Margaret, vehemently. "So many boys have caps like that."

Her mother shook her head sorrowfully. "Not with 'N.M.' embroidered on it, Maggie. I fear there is no doubt. The waiter says he has been there many times."

"I don't believe it," again said Margaret. "But oh! Mamma, where is he now?"

"I don't know. We cannot tell. Papa has gone to make inquiries."

"Shall we tell Florence and Alick? Must they know?"

"Not yet, love. I fear they will have to know to-morrow," said Mrs. Medwin. "Margaret, dear, you must not stay here, you will catch cold."

"Oh! Mamma, indeed I cannot sleep; let me stop with you."

"Lie down on the sofa then, and let me wrap something round you," returned Mrs. Medwin.

Margaret did so, and her mother, after throwing

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a warm shawl round her, seated herself on a low chair by her side. Neither of them spoke for a long time, and once more Margaret felt drowsy. When she opened her eyes again she was surprised to find that it was daylight—gray, chilly daylight. Her father was there and some one else, whom Margaret recognised as Mr. Staunton, Frank Ollie's uncle.

"They must have gone together," said Mr. Staunton. "Frank and your boy have been very friendly lately."

"I know that Alick is intimate with your nephew; but I do not think that Nigel was often his companion," said Mr. Medwin.

"I had forgotten you had two sons," continued Mr. Staunton; "then it is Nigel who is in this scrape, not Alick."

"Yes, Nigel," sighed Mr. Medwin. "It was his cap that was found at the Red Lion, and he has been out all night. I have been hunting for him in every direction."

"They most likely took the mail-train to London," said Mr. Staunton. "Have you spoken to Alick? Where is he?"

"He is asleep, I hope. He went to bed very tired, and we have not told him yet of the disturbances."

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"Perhaps he can throw some light on the subject," said Mr. Staunton. "Suppose we go and speak to him."

The two gentlemen left the room together; and Mrs. Medwin told Margaret that inquiries had been made everywhere. It was supposed that Ollie and two of his companions had started for London, but whether Nigel was one of them no one could tell.

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CHAPTER XIII.

"GOODY'S GRINDLE."

As we have said before, it was a miserably damp, raw evening when Nigel left home to fulfil Florence's wishes. He looked up and down the street in search of the Sedgemere dog-cart, but it was not visible; and, with an impatient shrug of his shoulders, he turned the corner and walked briskly along the turnpike road.

Umbrellas were despised articles in Nigel's estimation, but he half wished he had been prudent enough to don his great coat, when he found, after going some little distance, that he was not overtaken. "Very likely the man has forgotten all about Flo's parcel, and has driven straight back," he thought. "I have a good mind to turn homeward again."

Too good-natured, however, to relinquish his design easily, he still walked forwards, gradually leaving the town behind, till the last row of gas lamps had disappeared, and he was fairly in the open country. Then he paused,—"No use in

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Nigel carrying the parcel for Florence.—P. **197.**

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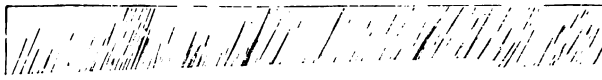

Nigel carrying the parcel for Florence.—P. 197.

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waiting, at any rate," he said to himself; "for even if the dog-cart passed me now, it would be too dark to see it. I may as well carry the parcel myself. I only wish Flo had chosen a finer evening to send me such a walk." Nigel toiled bravely up the hill, and then hesitated again. By crossing some fields, known by the name of "Goody's Grindle," he would make his journey at least half a mile shorter; but the path lay between deep ditches, and it was likely to be very muddy. However, Nigel did not consider the obstacles great—he strode over the stile and pursued his way, wondering meantime how he should manage to finish his lessons, and whether Mr. Clarke would be disposed to let him off lightly, if his work were not done.

He half regretted having forsaken the high road, for the narrow path seemed muddier than ever. The late rains had filled the ditches, and when the clouds broke a little, Nigel could see plainly the running water on each side of him.

Presently there was a turn in the path, and Nigel came to a little bridge thrown across a point where the ditch widened into a tolerably large stream. Here Nigel had made his first experiences in fishing for minnows; but the quiet rippling water in

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summer was very different to the rushing torrent which had now shaken the fragile plank from its not very solid foundations. This Nigel did not see; the rain was coming on again, he buttoned his jacket closely over his chest, and whistling to keep up his spirits, he stepped forward on the narrow bridge. It gave way under him, and he fell headlong into the water. It was not very deep, and with all the natural instinct of self-preservation Nigel struggled to the opposite bank, sinking over his ankles in clay at first, but with a little further effort gaining firmer ground. It was not till then that he discovered a large wound on his forehead which was bleeding fast, and which made him feel very faint. The poor boy made a few more steps in the direction of Sedgemere; it was nearer than home now; and then his strength failing him entirely, he sat down on a piece of timber and burst into tears. For a minute or two he remained quite still, too exhausted to heed the heavy rain drops, or to attempt to stanch the blood which flowed freely from the cut in his forehead. It was a forlorn situation, and no wonder that for a time the boy's energies seemed to fail; but he was no craven, and combating with weakness, he tied his handkerchief round his head and

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resolved to try to reach a tiny cottage at the other end of the field. It was hard, weary work; for Nigel felt as if the strength had died out of his limbs; and his dripping clothes impeded all his movements, but each step brought him nearer to his resting-place. There was no friendly light in the cottage window, but Nigel did not hesitate in tapping at the door. The summons was not heard, and he knocked again a little louder, apparently with more success, for, although the door was not undone, he could hear voices within.

"Please let me in," cried Nigel, rattling the door as he spoke.

A window was opened, and a little girl with a shawl over her head looked out. "Who is there?" she said. "What do you want?"

"I have fallen into the water, and am very wet, and I have cut my forehead, and I cannot walk any farther," said Nigel. "May I come in, and dry my clothes?"

"I don't know," returned the little girl; "I'll ask Grandfather."

Grandfather appeared to be very deaf and not very hospitable. Nigel could hear plainly the child describing his appearance as a "tall boy, with his head tied up;" and he heard, too, the old

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man's gruff reply, "Tell him to be off; it is only a tramp's trick. We have little enough to lose, and I won't be robbed of that."

"If you will let me in, I will pay you," shouted Nigel through the window, as loud as his failing strength would let him; and the old man muttering, "He speaks like a gentleman, anyhow," undid the bolt, and sulkily allowed the uninvited guest to enter.

"We go to bed early," said the old man, "to save lights and firing; but if you like to pay for it, my grandchild can light a fire for you. She is dressing herself in the little room yonder."

Even while he spoke the little girl reappeared, with a bundle of wood in her arms, and proceeded briskly to light the fire. Weak and exhausted as he was, Nigel could not but notice how cleverly she went to work. He moved nearer the hearth, and she turned suddenly round, and looked at him. "Grandfather," she said, "you must lend the young gentleman your Sunday coat; he must not keep those wet things on."

The old man nodded, and calling Nigel into the inner room, helped him to divest himself of his wet clothes, and arrayed him in a wonderful suit of fustians, in which he felt very uncomfortable. The

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little girl brought him some water to bathe his forehead, and bound the handkerchief round it again rather more deftly than before. When Nigel returned to the room where the fire had been lighted, the old man pointed to the bed. "You had better lie down there, young master; you must be pretty well worn out. What could have brought you across the Grindle such a night as this?"

Nigel started up. "I was taking a parcel to Colonel Wayland's, and I dropped it when I fell into the brook. Oh, how sorry I am!"

"What was in the parcel? Was it worth anything?" asked the old man, eagerly.

"It was only a bit of needlework," replied Nigel, with a boy's contempt of knick-nacks. "Still, I am sorry. If I had a lantern," he continued, "I think I would go and look for it."

"I could lend you a lantern," said the old man; "but I reckon you won't be fit to use it."

And, indeed, when the boy tried to rise and walk across the room, he found himself unable to do so. Now that the necessity for action was over, he felt that the power of making an effort was gone, and, with a weary sigh, he flung himself back on the bed and closed his eyes. Once more the tears welled up under his eyelids as he thought how

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anxious his mother would be for his safety. Then came the longing for her loving, tender care, and after all a feeling of thankfulness for the shelter he had found; and then Nigel fell asleep.

He woke early in the morning, feverish, and every limb full of pain; his head aching, his eyes hardly able to bear the light; but they were not too weak to leave unnoticed Florence's parcel, which lay on his pillow, the white paper round it streaked with mud, the contents, most probably, damp and discoloured with rain. Nigel looked at it in perplexity; he felt almost too ill to inquire how it came there; but the old man was ready to tell him.

"Nellie," he said, "was up by daybreak, hunting for it; but it was sadly wet when she brought it in."

"It is no use sending it now," said Nigel, surveying it ruefully. "Oh, how my legs ache! I don't know how I am to get home."

That question puzzled him still more when he tried to rise and failed in the endeavour. All he could do was to drink down another cup of very poor tea, and to write a few words on a piece of paper torn from Florence's parcel.

The note ran thus :—

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"DEAR MOTHER,

"Don't be frightened; I had a ducking last night, and was forced to stop by the way to dry. If you can, please send for me, as I do not feel able to walk home. I shall be all right as soon as I get there.

" Your affectionate Son,

" NIGEL."

Little Nellie took this in charge, and her promise to deliver it as speedily as possible quieted Nigel effectually. He closed his eyes again, and waited patiently; but the time seemed very long before Nellie started, and longer still when she had once set forth on her errand. The old man was anxious to go to his work, and soon after the little girl had left the cottage, he asked Nigel if he wanted anything more.

"No," returned the boy wearily; "I only want rest."

"Then I'll be off, master," replied his host. "Nellie will soon be back, I daresay;" and with a parting nod he went out, and Nigel was left in solitude.

A sense of desolation weighed heavily on the

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boy as he wearily turned his aching head on the uneasy pillow. The pain was almost more than he knew how to bear, and sad, sorrowful thoughts came to add their load to his trouble.

Nigel had scarcely ever known what illness was, and now it seemed to have struck him down heavily. Would it last long? How would it end? He thought of all his past life—of all he might have done—of the opportunities he had neglected, —and he groaned more with trouble than with pain. Then he thought of Margaret, and the happy days when the twins were tiny children playing in the nursery, or looking at pictures at their mother's knee; and Nigel remembered then his favourite 'Pilgrim's Progress,' with large illustrations. One picture seemed to float before his eyes—the picture thus described :—"So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back and began to tumble, and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more."

Nigel had read the book almost as a story when he was a little boy; but as he lay, sick and alone, in the quiet little cottage, the meaning of that picture was made very clear to him. All the old

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trouble seemed to fade away, and though his head still ached, and feverish pains started through his limbs, Nigel could lay his burden down and find comfort in looking upward.

When little Nellie reached Princes Street, she found the house in an unusual state of commotion. Morning light had partially brought a clue to many mysteries. Alick, clinging with a sort of desperation to the hope of eluding discovery, had doggedly disclaimed any knowledge of the proceedings at the Red Lion. Nigel's disappearance seemed at first to favour his statements; but the case was altered when Florence had heard of the events of the night. Full of indignation, and without waiting to explain to the astonished Margaret and Miss Dacre, she rushed into the dining-room where Mr. Staunton and her aunt and uncle were still in solemn conclave with Alick,—

" Nigel did not go to the Red Lion, Aunt," cried Florence, in her eagerness forgetting her usual courtesy of manner. " He went to Sedgemere for me, to carry my parcel."

" For you, Florence? Oh! why did you not tell us last night?"

Mrs. Medwin's tone betrayed more displeasure than Florence could have believed possible from

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one usually so gentle, and she stammered and replied,—

"I—I was afraid you would be angry, and I thought he must have returned last night."

"When did he leave the house?" asked Mr. Staunton.

"About half-past seven o'clock," returned Florence.

"And the attack on Mr. Marsden took place about an hour later," said Mr. Medwin; while Mr. Staunton added,—

"Yes; I am afraid Nigel is not cleared from suspicion."

"He could not, would not go to the Red Lion," again persisted Florence; "he took my parcel, and the Sedgemere road is in quite another direction."

"Did you see him start, Florence?" asked Mrs. Medwin.

"Yes, Aunt; I saw him put on his trencher, and close the hall-door."

"He did not wear his trencher, Flo," interposed Mr. Medwin rather impatiently; "he wore his red flannel cricket-cap, and left it behind him in the billiard-room—you must be more careful as to your facts."

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Florence looked offended, and half turned to leave the room.

"I am nearly positive he had his college-cap," she said, in a resentful tone; and as she spoke, Alick started visibly, and looked up with mantling colour in his cheek.

"But are you sure of it, Florence?" again asked her uncle.

"Yes, Uncle; at least, I think so," returned Florence, a little frightened and confused by his stern look.

"I am afraid that merely thinking is hardly to be depended upon," said Mr. Staunton; while Mr. Medwin added,—

"Florence was very wrong in sending Nigel out; she knows we do not like the boys to be disturbed while preparing their lessons."

"May I go, Papa?" said Alick, the flush which had overspread his face turning once more to a deadly whiteness.

"Yes; but, Alick, I think you had better not go to school this morning. I shall have to go and speak to Dr. Ward in a few minutes, and will tell him you have a holiday by my desire."

As Alick and Florence left the room together, Mr. Medwin added,—

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"Poor fellow! he looks quite knocked up and ill; he feels more for his brother than he can express."

Alick walked wearily up to his own room, and threw himself on the bed; his physical strength seemed spent. Before him he saw nothing but detection and disgrace, and he felt as though he had lost all power to evade such a fate.

Such was the state of affairs when little Nellie appeared. The servants, unwilling to trouble Mrs. Medwin unnecessarily in this time of trial, rather repulsed the child when she begged to see the mistress; but Nellie was not to be easily baffled.

"This is a note from the young gentleman," she said; "and, please, I think he is ill."

"From Master Nigel!" cried Ann, snatching it eagerly. "That is good news!—come in, child, and wait a minute."

Nellie was rather alarmed in her turn to be summoned to the council in the dining-room. The two gentlemen only were there, Mrs. Medwin having hastened to prepare to go to Nigel. The little girl answered the questions put to her very simply. She told how Nigel had arrived at her grandfather's cottage dripping wet from his fall in the brook; how he had sheltered there, and how

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the next morning she had gone out to look for his parcel.

"I found that and his cap too," said Nellie; "but the cap is quite spoilt. The young gentleman won't be able to wear it again."

"What sort of a cap was it?" asked Mr. Staunton.

"Like what the gentlemen at the school wear," said Nellie.

Mr. Medwin stepped into the hall, returning with Alick's trencher. "Like this, do you mean; or was it a red one?" he asked; and there was a painful tone of anxiety in the question.

"It was like that; it was not a red one," replied Nellie; "but it was quite covered with mud; it won't be of any use. Please, sir," she continued, "I don't think the young gentleman can walk home. He was very bad when I left, and he is all alone too."

"You had better have a cab," said Mr. Staunton. "I will fetch one;" and as he left the room he added, "It is very strange, but after all there is some hope for Nigel."

Mrs. Medwin and little Nellie were soon on their way to the cottage on the Grindle, which fortunately could be reached by the high road, though

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the actual distance was greater that way than by the fields. It was not long ere the mother was bending over her weary, suffering boy, bringing relief and comfort in her very presence; ay, and gaining comfort too, as she met the glance of his loving eyes, bright with pleasure at seeing her.

"Mother, dear," he whispered, with his arm tight round her neck, "were you terribly frightened about me?"

"Yes," she replied, smoothing back his hair; "tell me, Nigel, did you walk straight here when you left home, or did you go anywhere else?"

"I came so straight, mother, that I did not even follow the turn of the bridge, and splashed into the water instead." Then, as he noted his mother's uneasy, anxious expression, Nigel added, "Why, Mamma, where else could I have gone?"

"Not to the Red Lion, I hope, Nigel?"

"No, dear mother," was the quiet reply; and while Mrs. Medwin felt inwardly convinced that her boy spoke truth, Nigel's earnest glance half divined the state of affairs. His mother added no more, but hastened to prepare him for departure; and with promises to little Nellie that they would see her again, and the bestowal of something nameless, more substantial than promises, Mrs. Medwin,

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with her boy, re-entered the cab and drove off home. Very little was said by the way, for when the excitement of seeing his mother had a little subsided, Nigel found himself once more very susceptible to aches and pains; so much so, indeed, that he did not scout the notion of going at once to bed, on his arrival at home. He was too ill to note Margaret's awe-struck face as he entered, or perhaps he concluded that it was sufficiently accounted for by his non-appearance the preceding night. He wondered, indeed, that Alick should walk out of his bedroom as he went in, without expressing any interest as to his welfare; but it was nothing unusual for Alick to be ungracious, and Nigel never cared to be fussed with. His principal thought was that no one could arrange pillows like Mamma, and he nestled down amongst them, fully appreciating the rest. The weary pain in his forehead prevented Nigel in his quiet bedroom from noting the general air of depression that hung over the house. Margaret had come to sit with him, and had received injunctions not to talk. She sat bolt upright, her hands playing restlessly with the tassels of her apron, longing for her papa's return from the school. She had been unable to learn any further intelligence; and though she was burn-

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"You will make me ten thousand times worse,

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" Do try and go to sleep, dear—you know you ought not to talk."—P. 212.

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if you are so provoking, Maggie," returned her brother. "What is the matter? I must know."

"Only that some boys played billiards last night at the Red Lion, and Mr. Marsden came, and they knocked him down," said Margaret in desperation.

"And what else?" asked Nigel, quietly; "was he hurt?"

"Yes, very much. O Nigel, I wish you would not make me tell you."

"Who was there? What boys, I mean?" continued Nigel.

"They ran away; Ollie was one, and—and—" the next words came with a gulp,—"your red flannel cap was there."

Margaret expected some vehement explosion after this speech; but Nigel's tone was still quiet, though his smile was bitter.

"Without my head in it. No wonder I have nearly been convicted on circumstantial evidence. Is that all, Maggie?"

"Yes, I think so; but, Nigel, I am sure you were not there, were you?" said Margaret.

"No, Maggie, my head aches very much; please draw down the blind, and I think I had better be quiet for a little time."

He lay so still after this that Margaret fancied

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he must be asleep, and stole quietly out of the room to look for Florence, and to learn if her papa had come home again. She was disappointed, however. Mrs. Wayland had sent the pony-chaise to fetch Florence to Sedgemere, and the young lady, though anxious that Nigel should be cleared from blame, did not think it necessary to forego her festivities on his account. Margaret learned, too, from one of the servants, that her father had been in, had called Alick, and that the two had walked away together towards the school. "And Master Alick looked as ill as Master Nigel when he went with his papa," concluded Ann. Margaret turned away with a heavy heart and foreboding of ill, and sought refuge with Miss Dacre.

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CHAPTER XIV.

SHADOWS.

THE day wore on heavily. Margaret found it impossible to give her attention to lessons, and Miss Dacre pityingly released her, and proposed that she should go and amuse Beatrix. It was almost as difficult to do that as to study; but Margaret remembered that it was the hour Bee generally spent with Mamma, and she went to the nursery, hoping to persuade her mother to lie down and rest while she took her place.

Mrs. Medwin smiled gratefully, and looked pleased at Margaret's thoughtfulness. "Yes, if Nigel be asleep, I will lie down for a little while," she said. "It is unfortunate that Mr. Hastings should have just started to see a patient in the country when we sent for him."

Margaret busied herself with Bee's box of letters, but was sorry that she did not hear her mother leave Nigel's room, and go to her own. Mrs.

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Medwin was dismayed to find the boy full of excitement, flushed, and eager, with Margaret's story working in his brain, and quite unable to get the quiet sleep he so much needed. The minute she entered the room, his questioning eyes sought hers, seeking information which perhaps he hardly liked to ask more openly. All she could do was to give him leave to talk over the mystery with her; but even that did not answer. Nigel evidently seemed to know something connected with the affair, though innocent of it himself. His questions were not so pointed as might have been expected, and Mrs. Medwin would have been very glad to have fathomed all that was working in his thoughts.

At one o'clock Mr. Medwin and Alick returned from the school; and as the mother of the family came down to meet them, she stood alarmed at the look of depression expressed in both countenances. Alick passed her with downcast eyes, and stole off to some out-of-the-way nook where he might for a while bear his wretchedness alone.

Mr. Medwin remained to tell the sad result of the morning's examination. The billiard-marker had identified Alick as one of those present at the Red Lion the previous evening. "The young gentleman's brother," he said, "he knew very well by

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sight; but he had never been a billiard-player, to the best of his knowledge."

The landlord of the inn, anxious to be cleared from imputation, sided with the authorities, and was very assiduous in helping to sift matters. Alick was exonerated from blame, so far as concerned the attack on Mr. Marsden, which was attributed to Ollie and the two boys, Martin and Griffiths, who had escaped with him. Stevens and Alick were the only two appearing to answer to the charge, and of the party perhaps they were the least guilty; but it was a case which deserved no light punishment; and though Mr. Marsden's injuries had been rather over-stated, and he was pronounced out of danger, Dr. Ward's sentence was rigorous. In consideration of the youth of the offenders, and the temptation from elder boys to which they had been exposed, Dr. Ward did not expel them from the school; but all the ground gained by the hard work of the past year was lost, and when Alick again took his place in the classes it would be much below his brother Nigel,—a far severer punishment this than the extra amount of task-work also allotted to him, which would keep him out of mischief during many of the hours which should have been spent in recreation.

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As for Ollie and his companions, Mr. Marsden had refused to prosecute; and as yet no trace of their whereabouts had been discovered. Mr. Medwin felt his grief to be comparatively slight to that of Frank Ollie's widowed mother, who had insisted on being present at the examination, and whose utterly wretched face struck pity into the hearts of all.

Life looked very blank to Alick, as he sat alone in a lumber-room, whither he had betaken himself to escape observation. He had nothing to look forward to—he had lost all credit; and now that his hopes were gone of taking a good position in the school, it seemed as if all relish for study would depart too. Even careless Nigel held a higher post than he! And then Alick went on wondering how matters would have turned out if Nigel had not returned, and if the billiard-marker had not betrayed him. His thoughts wandered so far in this direction, that he started with horror to find where they were leading him.

It was very cold in the lumber-room, and Alick, after shivering for a while, determined to go to the nursery fire, and comfort himself there as well as he could.

He found the three younger children clustered

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round the hearth, and rather imperiously he told Donald to make room for him. Donald moved a little, and Alick sat down moodily. The little ones, who had been chatting merrily enough before, lapsed into silence, and Alick felt that they were gazing at him with curious eyes.

"What are you staring at?" he asked. "Why don't you go on talking?"

"Alick," asked Donald, seriously, "are not you very sorry that you are not going to be in the fifth form any longer?"

Alick gave an impatient groan. So the children knew it already! This was the beginning of disgrace.

Harry continued: "You will be in the same class with little Fred Ferguson. He is such a stupid boy; I think I know as much as he does!"

"You have more conceit, at any rate," said Alick; and the nursery fire seemed likely to afford little comfort, till Beatrix, who understood nothing of all this trouble, climbed on Alick's knee, and offered to show him "all her pretty pictures." Alick, in his loneliness, could not repulse her, as he would, perhaps, have done at any other time. The little child's simple confidence touched him more than he would have confessed.

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Mr. Hastings came that afternoon, and his report of Nigel was far from cheering. Towards evening the boy grew heavy and listless; but later still, the feverish symptoms increased; he spoke rapidly and incoherently, and at times was slightly delirious. He asked for Alick more than once; but when his brother came into the room, he turned his head away impatiently, muttering, "He will not listen to me; it is no good talking to him."

"You had better not stay, Alick," said his mother; and Alick was thankful to leave the room again, his heart heavier than before. It was something so strange to see Nigel's usually bright, merry face drawn with pain, while the bonnie dark eyes wore a restless, uneasy look, quite foreign to them.

"Be kind to Alick, dear Maggie," whispered Mrs. Medwin, when Margaret stole into the sick-room with a message from her father.

"Oh, Mamma, I cannot!" was Margaret's reply. "I never can act what I do not feel."

"Try, Maggie! If Nigel were well, he would be the first to try to help poor Alick."

Margaret herself was sure of that, and she went in search of her brother, with the strange feeling that she should not know what to say to him when she had found him. Alick and she were so little

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together; they had no sympathies in common. Nigel had so absorbed all her affection, that Alick's interests and pursuits had seemed quite a separate world. Margaret wondered to herself whether it was quite right to bestow such exclusive love on one brother, so little on the other. Alick was lying on the hearthrug in the deserted dining-room when she entered. Margaret moved towards the fire, intending to light the gas; but as she bent forward, the ruddy gleam from the grate showed traces of tears on Alick's cheek. She wisely thought that he would hardly wish for more light to make such disclosures more complete; so she seated herself quietly in the leather arm-chair, hoping that Alick would begin the conversation.

Presently he said, in a low, hoarse voice, "Does Mr. Hastings think Nigel will get better, Margaret?"

Margaret started violently. The possibility of Nigel's not getting better had never occurred to her. "Mr. Hastings thinks he is very ill; but oh, Alick, he cannot mean that!"

"There seems no hope for anything just now," continued Alick, in the same low tone.

"Do you really mean what you said about Nigel? O Alick, you would not tease me about

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such a thing as that!" cried Margaret, trembling with agony.

Her brother raised himself into a sitting posture. "I wish it was only teasing!" Then with a sudden demonstration of feeling, such as Margaret had never seen in him before, he pressed her hands tightly in his own, saying, "I never knew how much I cared for him till now."

Yet Margaret could hardly heed him. "My darling! my darling!" she murmured to herself; "I could not live without my own Nigel!"

"I did not mean to frighten you, Maggie," said Alick. "Nigel is strong. I don't know what should have made me talk so. There! don't fret, dear!" He was kneeling by her side as he spoke, and he put his arm round her neck and kissed her.

"O Alick! what shall we do?" sobbed poor Margaret. "How could Florence send him out in the wet to carry her trumpery parcel! Selfish creature! I shall not be able to bear the sight of her!"

"I suppose she did not intend to do any harm," said Alick. "Don't go and pick a quarrel with her now, Maggie."

"She deserves it," replied Margaret; "Why should not I?"

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"Papa and Mamma have enough to worry them just now without that," said Alick, in a low tone. "Maggie, if I had taken Nigel's advice at first, I should not have been in all this trouble."

Margaret looked up interested. "Did he know about it?" she asked, eagerly.

"He tried to prevent it," said Alick, "and I snubbed him for his pains."

"And he never told tales of you!" said Margaret. "He is a dear, good fellow!"

"I never found it out before," said Alick; "somehow I thought myself the better man of the two, Margaret."

"No one else ever did," returned his sister, bluntly. "Nigel is worth a dozen of you."

Alick looked somewhat nettled, and then replied sadly, "You have never tried to make me better, Maggie. I have sometimes thought it must be pleasant to be cared for, as you care for Nigel; but I suppose it is my own fault that it is not so."

Margaret repented her hasty words. "I did not know I was unkind to you," she said; "I did not think you wanted me."

"No, perhaps not; and I do not say that you could anyhow have prevented matters from coming to the pass they have done. But I tell you this,

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Maggie: it is the remembrance of dear old Nigel's kindness about this that makes me feel sorry now. The punishment, of course, is bad to bear, and so is Papa's displeasure, and all the disgrace; but now that Nigel is ill, I think more about him than any one."

"You will begin again differently," said Margaret. "There is no reason why you should not work your way up afresh."

"I feel as if I had lost all spirit for work," returned Alick. "I wish Papa would send me away to school."

"You can ask him," began Margaret; but her brother interrupted her.

"No, never mind about it now. Margaret, you need not repeat what I have been telling you."

"Of course not," rejoined Margaret, who was sufficiently accustomed to boyish confidences from her other brother to know that they must be held sacred.

"I did not mean to offend you," said Alick; "only I know girls are prone to chatter. If I thought otherwise, perhaps I might talk to you a little oftener."

Margaret felt disposed to resent the patronage,

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but had the sense to perceive that Alick really was glad of her sympathy.

"We must make the room look cheerful before Papa comes in," she said, after a minute's pause; and Alick abetted her design with more alacrity than was his wont, yet when his father did appear, he seemed to be absorbed in a book, and hardly raised his eyes till supper-time.

Mr. Medwin took but little notice of Alick, for his heart was full of Nigel's illness; but as they were about to separate for the night, he laid a detaining hand on Alick's shoulder: "One moment, my boy," he said, "and you shall go. I cannot talk to you to-night, Alick, of your fault—and, indeed, it has brought its own punishment; only remember, for the future, that your own cleverness will never be sufficient to keep you from evil. Have the courage to own your weakness, and use the only weapons that can avail against temptation. Remember, too," he added, kindly, "that if you can give me your perfect confidence, I may perhaps be better able to help you than any one else."

Alick stood with downcast eyes and burning cheeks; he made no attempt to move, yet said nothing.

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"Have you anything to tell me, Alick?" asked Mr. Medwin, quietly. "Do not be afraid."

Alick murmured a few inarticulate words, of which Mr. Medwin could only distinguish the name of Florence.

"Florence!" he said; "is she concerned in your troubles, as well as Nigel's? What about Florence, Alick?"

"Her half-sovereign—I took it!" at last cried Alick, desperately. "I intended to pay it back; but I lost it betting with Ollie, and since then I have not been able."

"You had some money given you about a fortnight ago," said Mr. Medwin, sternly.

"I might have given it back then; but I was ashamed," said Alick, "and the money has gone since."

"And you suffered Ann to be suspected of taking this money! It was acting a lie, as well as a theft. I little thought one of my sons could have done this."

Mr. Medwin walked quietly up and down the room. When he spoke to Alick again, his voice had resumed its gentle tone. "To-morrow, Alick," he said, "you must tell Florence—indeed, I wish the whole household to know the truth. Suspicion

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must not be allowed to rest on any innocent person."

Then dismissing his second son, Mr. Medwin went upstairs to look at Nigel, and to arrange to watch by his bedside the second half of the night. His patient wife's loving greeting, as she made him promise to try to rest for some hours at least, did much to comfort the father's aching heart, though it could not wholly disperse the cloud whose silver lining was as yet unseen.

It did not seem clearer on the morrow. Nigel did not appear to be worse; but he was certainly very ill, and seemed strangely weak. He still complained of intense pain in every limb, and the doctor spoke of rheumatic fever.

Margaret pitied Alick, as he pushed aside his almost untasted breakfast that morning. Poor fellow! the duty that lay before him was a hard and bitter one; but there was no evading it; and, standing by his father's side, he made his faltering confession to Florence. So white was his face, that Mr. Medwin, in pity, required no more, but himself told the servants that the mystery was solved, sorrowfully naming the delinquent.

Florence's look of anger and contempt, and her half-uttered exclamation of "Disgraceful!" were

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checked when she saw that Alick was trembling all over, and could hardly stand. "Don't think any more about it," she said, kindly. "I deserved to lose it for my carelessness."

"Nay, Florence," said Mr. Medwin; "Alick knows that it is no light matter; but he will feel happier now that he has told you."

Just then, however, confession did not seem to bring relief. Alick was thoroughly over-wrought, and Mr. Medwin decided that he was quite unfit for school that day.

"But, Papa, I must go," he said; "Dr. Ward will not like me to have holidays now."

"You are not able to go, Alick; if you do, I shall have you as ill as Nigel, and under the doctor's care. Maggie dear, see that he lies quietly on the sofa for an hour. You may read him to sleep, if you can."

Alick buried his face in the pillow, and felt more miserable than ever. Such kindness from his father seemed harder to bear than sternness.

Margaret looked at him sadly. "Is there anything I can do for you, Alick?" she asked.

"Only leave me alone," muttered he, his voice half smothered by the sofa cushions.

It did seem the kindest thing to do just then;

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so she followed Florence to the schoolroom, where the morning lessons with Miss Dacre—who, for her pupils' sake, retained most of her usual bright manner—seemed a pleasant relief from the care that had oppressed them all.

When Margaret peeped into the dining-room, an hour later, Alick was sleeping soundly. She closed the door gently, and joined Florence and Miss Dacre in a walk to Aunt Jane's cottage, to give the morning's report of Nigel

Aunt Jane looked pinched and worn, and old Lucy told them that "Missis had been fretting her life out, because she could not go and nurse Master Nigel."

She welcomed them kindly, however, and was very minute in her inquiries for her favourite nephew, pouring out to Miss Dacre many infallible remedies, and regretting anew her incapacity to help personally.

Margaret thought, privately, that whatever might be Nigel's tastes, she should not wish for so fussy a nurse; and Florence remarked, "Nigel is well off, I think. I never saw any one like Auntie in a sick room; she always knows just the right thing to be done, and she is so gentle."

"I have no doubt the boy is well taken care of,

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only I would like to be with him, that is all," said Aunt Jane. "People always want what they can't have, Florence."

"I do very often," said Florence.

"Do you?" interposed Margaret, eagerly. Florence's requirements were generally readily supplied, and Maggie often thought that her cousin was a person to be envied.

Florence made some vague reply; she did not wish to particularize her longings, which were chiefly for more society and more gaieties than Wykeham could afford.

"If we do not have all we want, it is because we are best without it. We ought to know that," said Aunt Jane. "It is certain that I am intended to gain good on my sofa here, though sometimes I find it hard to think so."

If Margaret had been alone with her aunt, she would have asked her whether she thought that Nigel's illness was for his good. Alick had brought his trouble on himself; but Nigel—she could see no fault in him that deserved punishment—what was he intended to learn from all his pain and sickness?

The question occupied her mind all the way home, and even then it was by no means satisfactorily solved.

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CHAPTER XV.

BY THE SEASIDE.

It was a bright sunny morning in April, warm as we often have it in the early spring; yet, apparently, the genial weather was not considered thoroughly reliable, for the tall, thin boy lazily throwing pebbles into the rippling waves that broke on the shore was as well protected with great coat and comforter as if the wind were wintry. He looked to have outgrown his strength; but still his cheeks glowed with the flush of returning health, and his eyes shone with that peculiar brightness which Nigel's mother considered their especial charm. Maggie was his companion, and the twins were thoroughly enjoying a *tête-à-tête*, from which they had long been debarred.

"How delicious it is to sit here!" said Margaret, "with nothing whatever to do,—no lessons with Miss Dacre,—no housekeeping worries,—nothing that is horrible! Don't you like staying here, Nigel?"

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"Yes; it is very pleasant, especially having Mamma all to myself. If it were not for being selfish, I could very well stay here another month."

"Ah! but we want Mamma at home," said Margaret. "I do the best I can, but things *will* look wretched without her. You cannot think how I jumped for joy when Papa proposed bringing me here with him for the two last days of your stay! It really is dull at home."

"You have Miss Dacre and Florence," said Nigel.

"Miss Dacre is very kind; but Florence is in an unhappy frame of mind. It would have done her good to come with Papa, instead of me; but he did not seem to wish it."

"What is the matter with Florence?" asked Nigel.

"The Waylands have deserted her; they have had a French young lady staying with them, and some grand people besides, and they almost cut Flo in the street the other day."

"She would not like that," remarked Nigel.

"No; she has not been very pleasant company in consequence; and she takes advantage of Mamma's being away, and is rude to Miss Dacre."

"That's a shame," said Nigel.

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Margaret continued: "Poor Alick has really been the only comfort I have had, and he looks rather wretched. We want you back, Nigel, to cheer us up."

"Alick has written such amusing letters to me," said Nigel, "that I did not imagine he was at all wretched."

"Yes, he is," said Margaret; "he tells me his troubles sometimes, and it is very hard for him to take such a different position at school. He bears it bravely, though."

"You are getting quite fond of Alick, I believe," said Nigel.

"He is very much kinder to me than he used to be," replied Margaret. "You know I never tried to make the best of Alick, and I have felt so sorry for him; and then he cares a great deal for you, Nigel, so we have that in common."

Nigel looked gratified. "Ah! we shall be better friends now that Ollie and those fellows are out of the way. Has Ollie been heard of yet, Margaret?"

"Yes; he was obliged to write to his mother for money; and I think his uncle has found him a situation as clerk in London. I do not think he will ever be very steady."

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"It is a comfort that he has left Wykeham," said Nigel. "He was a clever, attractive fellow, and I do not wonder that Alick felt flattered by his friendship."

"Are you to go to school when you return home?" asked Margaret.

"Yes, I think so, for another year; and then I suppose I shall have to begin work in earnest."

"With Papa?" said Margaret. "It will be delightful having you always at home!"

"No; I shall go to London first, I believe. I have talked to Mamma about it, Maggie, and I see a good many reasons now why I should learn Papa's business."

"What are they?" asked Margaret.

"There is a large family to be provided for, and one day Papa will be glad to have a son able to help him, and to put on the harness when he slips it off."

"And you do not mind it?"

"Yes, I do mind it sometimes; not so much as I did, though; and I see that it is my duty clearly enough. I have had plenty of time to think it over lately, thanks to my illness; and, really, I don't know any other business I should like better. I have not brains enough for any profession—that

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we must leave to Alick. Uncle Hesketh will make a way for him."

"Very well," said Margaret; "I am resigned if you are: only remember, Nigel, if ever you have a house of your own, I shall be your housekeeper."

"You will be getting married instead," replied he.

"That is not likely; I shall never see any one I like so well as you."

Nigel laughed. "And what if I get married myself?"

"You will never do that. Who would have anybody with a twin sister always hanging about him!"

The two children laughed again, and went on busily shaping their castles in the air, and forming plans for Nigel's future *menage*, till they were warned to sit still no longer.

Mr. and Mrs. Medwin, too, had found ample subject for discussion as they paced the sands together. They were talking of Florence.

"She really has been very provoking lately," said Mr. Medwin. "She is unpunctual at meals, cross to the children, especially to Margaret, and impertinent to Miss Dacre. She seems restless and discontented; I think she will not stay with us much longer."

"I should be sorry to think that," replied Mrs.

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Medwin. "Florence would be lonely at home, and I am sure she is really fond of us."

"Yes; but she craves perpetually for admiration and excitement. Our quiet life is too dull and monotonous for her."

"I do not quite know how to make it otherwise. Our own children have been happy enough, and the discipline is good for Florence."

"If she will but profit by it," said Mr. Medwin. "Those visits to Sedgemere have not done her any good; she always comes back with her head full of nonsense. Why cannot she be happy with Margaret?"

"It is very natural that she should enjoy society," said Mrs. Medwin.

"Yes; but from what I can see and hear of the Miss Waylands, and their mother, I doubt if they can do her much good; and their friendship is not to be relied on. They have not been to see her for the last three weeks, though the carriage has been in Wykeham continually."

"Florence will find out for herself their insincerity, then," said Mrs. Medwin. "Love of self has proved a strong temptation to her, and to Alick; they have both to learn that the world's approbation is not the one thing needful."

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"Alick is learning it, I hope," said Mr. Medwin. "Dr. Ward tells me he has been very pleased to see the boy bearing his punishment bravely and well; he works very steadily, though with no chance of prizes this term. He looks downcast, poor fellow; but he does not say much to me. Margaret has his chief confidence, apparently."

"I am glad Maggie is good to him," said the mother; "I have been afraid, sometimes, that her love for Nigel was too absorbing."

"She has been a very good girl," continued Mr. Medwin, warmly; "she has done her best to fill your place. She is growing into a woman fast, losing her childish heedlessness, and thinking more of other people's wants and requirements. The younger ones always seem happy when they are with her."

"Here she comes," said Mrs. Medwin, as the twins approached, rosy with their walk and the sea-breezes.

"Oh, Mamma!" cried Margaret, "how Harry, and Don, and Bee would enjoy this! I should like to see them digging on the sands."

"Perhaps you may, if all goes on well, in July," said Mrs. Medwin; "Papa talks of sending us all here then."

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"It will be almost as good as Florence's tour up the Rhine," said Margaret. "Do you know, Mamma, that since Uncle Hesketh has had a partner, he has written to say he shall have time to take a holiday in the summer, and he thinks of taking Florence up the Rhine."

"It will be a very pleasant change for her," said Mrs. Medwin.

"I am very glad she is going," continued Margaret, cordially. "It is so very quiet for her at Wykeham."

"More dull for her than for you, do you think, Maggie?" asked her mother.

"Oh, yes! because it is my home, and I have always been accustomed to it. I don't think I could be happy anywhere else."

"Yet you were not always so contented, Maggie; what makes the difference now?"

Mrs. Medwin and her daughter were walking forward alone; had it not been so, the former could hardly have heard the almost inaudible reply of Margaret,—

"It was so wrong, Mamma, to be ungrateful. I wanted to be invited out like Florence; but I do not think it makes her very happy, and I know that I am best at home, because I so easily

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become forgetful and careless, if I have not you, or some one to remind me of what is right."

"Papa has been very pleased with you since I have been out, Maggie," said Mrs. Medwin; "he says you have tried to be kind and helpful."

Margaret's cheeks glowed with pleasure; then she added, gently, "Perhaps he did not see everything. Mamma, I have so often thought I might have done better. I have not always been kind to Florence."

"You must go on trying, Maggie dear; do not be discouraged at your failures; look onward and upward, and 'be patient in well doing.'"

"It seems so hard, Mamma," said Margaret, thoughtfully. "I go on trying and failing, and seem to get no further. Sometimes I think other people cannot find it so difficult to do right." As she spoke a wave broke over her feet, and Margaret looked round surprised. "How quickly the tide is rising," she said; "half an hour ago it only touched the first post of the breakwater."

"Yes; yet each wave as it comes up seems to fall back again, but the water really gains ground," continued Mrs. Medwin, smiling.

Margaret smiled too—"You mean, Mamma, that I may be making progress like the tide."

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"Indeed, I hope so, my darling: if you have but the right foundation, these failures may serve as stepping-stones to higher things. You learn where you are most weak, and where you have the greatest need of help,—help which is never sought in vain, Maggie."

The tears shone in Margaret's eyes, and her voice quivered as she replied earnestly, "Mamma, I know it. When I have failed, it is because I have tried to go alone." Margaret's heart was full, and she could not tell her mother of the times when she had asked, and had received freely. She could not tell how Nigel's illness had led her to pray first for his recovery, then to seek more spiritual blessings for herself. All this was more to be felt than talked about, but Mrs. Medwin soon found occasion to notice that Margaret was less selfish, more humble in her opinion of herself, and more thoughtful in her care for others; and the mother's heart rejoiced.

Those two days at the seaside were a great treat to Margaret; she revelled in the fresh air and free exercise, in Nigel's companionship, and in the delights of paddling over the rocks at low tide in search of what she called "creatures." She would have liked to convey a cargo of sea-

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anemones back to Wykeham, but the cost of a proper aquarium, and the difficulty of procuring a supply of sea-water, were fatal obstacles.

It seemed almost as pleasant when the party returned home, and met once more, a complete family round the cheerful tea-table.

Such a merry assembly had not been found there for some time, and Margaret could not help thinking to herself that troubles must now be over, and that every one was going to turn over that charming "new leaf" which always promises such wonderful results.

But perhaps that page in Florence's history was hardly yet reached; for though on the first evening of Nigel's return she was bright and lively, yet her spirits soon flagged, and Margaret had to listen to the old tale of grievances which she had so often heard before. One day the girls were returning from their walk with Miss Dacre, when Florence espied Colonel Wayland's carriage coming up Princes Street. Anxious to catch sight of her friends, she loitered for a moment at the door, allowing Miss Dacre and Margaret to enter first. The horses slackened their pace as they approached, and finally stopped before a Berlin-wool shop. Florence eagerly stepped forward to

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greet Kate Wayland, who, with two lady friends, was alighting from the carriage, but Kate only vouchsafed a supercilious bow, and hurried into the shop; while Florence, full of indignation, followed her cousin, and eagerly hastened to recount her wrongs. Margaret began to sympathise, but she was soon checked. "It would not have happened, if I had been at home," cried Florence; "then I should have taken my proper position; I will bear it no longer. I wrote to Papa a fortnight ago to say I wished to go back to London, and so I will."

Margaret stared with speechless amazement at first, then she said, "Do you really mean to leave us, Florence?"

Something in the tone touched Florence's heart, though she still clung to her original idea. "I am not angry with you, Maggie," she said; "but I cannot endure these constant mortifications. I am not happy here, and I never shall be."

"Oh, Florence, how sorry Mamma will be!" said Margaret, sadly.

"No, she will be glad enough to be rid of such a troublesome charge," said Florence; then, with one of her sudden transitions from grave to gay, she added, "You shall come to stay with me, Maggie—we will have such fun."

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But Margaret's mind was not so easily diverted. "I am afraid I have not always been kind to you," she began.

"Kind; oh, yes, it is not that!" was the careless answer; "but, oh, Maggie, it *is* dull living here!"

"And you do not care for any of us?" said Margaret, a little pitifully.

"Yes, I do, Maggie dear;" and Florence's caressing hand stole softly over her cousin's; "but, don't you see, poor Papa is very lonely, and it will be so pleasant for him to have a daughter at home."

Margaret drew her hand away indignantly—"You should not pretend that it is on your papa's account that you want to leave us, Florence. You should at least be true in what you say."

"Well, if you are going off in the heroics, Margaret, we had better say no more about it," said Florence; "I wish that I had never told you I had written to Papa; promise me you will say nothing about it."

"Why not?" asked Margaret.

"Oh, I don't know—it is never worth talking of those things beforehand—promise me, dear."

"Very well," said Margaret, in rather a dissatisfied tone, and then the two girls went their separate

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ways. Margaret was sore at heart that Florence should be so anxious to leave Wykeham. She felt that her cousin's profession of affection was very little to be relied on, and she wondered whether all girlish friendships were as unstable. Then she began to wonder whom Florence really did love. Not her papa, or she would have been content to wait his wishes for her return home; not the Miss Waylands, for she was always railing against them, though she sought their society. All Florence seemed to care for was her own gratification. Margaret thought over all this, then she repented, thinking she was judging her cousin hardly, and resolved that she would do her best, so long as it lay in her power, to be loving and kind to her.

A few days more brought Mr. Hesketh down to Wykeham. He had been greatly perplexed by his daughter's letter, and had determined to see her and judge for himself. During the journey he could not help picturing to himself Florence at home once more, bright, loving, and helpful,—all that a daughter should be; cheering his loneliness, and giving sunshine to the desolate house. It was such a picture as Florence herself had conjured up in writing to him, and the fond father was

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willing to believe that it was for his sake alone that Florence was so ready to give up the companionship of her cousins. Then he thought again of the disadvantages arising from such a change of plans. Florence would be very lonely all day while her father was absent. She would be surely far happier with her aunt and cousins, than shut up with some sage *duenna*, whom he would have great difficulty in selecting.

It was impossible for Mr. Hesketh to decide the knotty question, till he had talked the matter over with Florence, and even then he could not see his way much more clearly. At the earliest opportunity Florence claimed her father for a walk, and her cherished plan was at once the subject of conversation.

"But, Flo," said Mr. Hesketh, in answer to her persuasions, "I must consider your happiness. You are much better off here than you would be in dreary London."

"With you, Papa? oh, no! besides, to tell you the truth, life here is not perfection."

"Ah! why? What is amiss? You and Margaret are good friends, I suppose?"

Florence hesitated. She knew her father would not appreciate her real reasons, so she had resort

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to subterfuge. "There are so many children," she said at length, "and they are always in one's way. You know it is tiring work to be perpetually teased by little ones who want to be amused." The plea was by no means a fair one, for Harry, Donald, and Beatrix had learnt by experience that Cousin Florence was "not to be troubled;" but Mr. Hesketh, who knew nothing of this, could readily imagine the claims of children would greatly worry anyone unaccustomed to them, and he sympathised with this view of the subject. "Still," he said, "though you may not have that annoyance at home, there is another point we must consider. If I take you away, I do not suppose your uncle would be able to retain Miss Dacre for Margaret; it is a pity she should lose such advantages."

"I dare say Margaret would not much care," said Florence.

"Then her parents would for her," said Mr. Hesketh; "however, you must be the first consideration. Do you really mean you are not happy here, Florence?"

"I would rather live with you, Papa, of course."

"Yes, my dear, and I should like to have you, and shall be very glad when you are old enough to take the head of my house; but just at present I

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really think you are better off under your aunt's care. If you return home, I shall have to find some elderly governess to keep you out of mischief, and it is doubtful how you would like that."

"Only try me, Papa," persisted Florence, undaunted; but Mr. Hesketh would only promise to consider the matter well, and there for the present Florence was obliged to leave it.

That evening, after the children had gone to bed, the parents had a long talk together on the subject, and for the first time Mr. Hesketh heard the cause of his daughter's desire. He was disposed to make excuses for her, and to think that perhaps she was hardly judged. At last he came to the decision that Florence must have her own way; and it was arranged that in July, after she had accompanied her father into Switzerland for a month's holiday, she should return home with him, provided he could meet with a suitable governess for her. Mrs. Medwin suggested that Miss Dacre should be asked to continue with Florence in London; but when it was named to her, Miss Dacre declined. Florence was a difficult charge for a governess to undertake; and if Miss Dacre could not stay at Wykeham, she would prefer an entire change.

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It was a real grief and disappointment to Mrs. Medwin to let Florence go. She loved her niece dearly for her sister's sake, as well as for her own; and she was as anxious for her welfare as for Margaret's. It pained her that Florence should so lightly value her love, and she could not believe that the girl would really be happier in her own home than at Wykeham. Florence's very anxiety to get away, was a proof that she needed great care—the care of a mother—now that she was fast growing out of childhood. She had suffered even at Wykeham, from being allowed to have her own way. There was so much sympathy felt for her at the time of her great sorrow—so much indulgence for the caprices of an only child, that she had had but little of the discipline which had been so good for Margaret; consequently, when any little vexations did arise, she could not bear them patiently, and because the Miss Waylands (for whom in reality she cared nothing) treated her with coldness, Florence was miserable, and felt that unless circumstances were altered, life was insupportable.

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CHAPTER XVI.

ALICK'S SACRIFICE.

"ALICK! Alick! open the door! You are surely not deaf," cried Margaret Medwin, rattling vigorously at the door-handle as she spoke. "Alick, don't be so provoking. You are wanted downstairs immediately; really and truly it is not nonsense."

"Who wants me?" replied Alick from within, in rather a surly tone.

"Uncle Hesketh; don't keep him waiting; you cannot guess what for, but I know; let me in, Alick."

"I wish you would let me learn my lessons in peace," grumbled Alick, slowly unlocking the door as he spoke. "Well, Margaret, what are you looking so delighted about?"

"You will know all in good time; but you do not deserve your good fortune, for you look as sulky as a bear. Uncle Hesketh wants to speak to

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you." Margaret's eyes twinkled, and she looked very mysterious.

"About this civil engineer affair, I suppose," said Alick, soberly enough. "Is that your grand secret, Maggie? Why, I have known all about it since last night. Nigel was in the room while Papa and Uncle were talking about it, and he could not help telling me afterwards."

"How stupid of him!" ejaculated Maggie; "but, Alick, are not you pleased?"

"I don't know," replied Alick; and Margaret went on, "Pray do not show such a long face to Uncle, or he will think you ungrateful." Alick passed his sister with an indignant "Pshaw!" and ran downstairs, while Margaret proceeded slowly to the schoolroom, saying to herself, "He is the strangest boy I ever met with; if only it had been poor dear old Nigel."

The clue to Margaret's meditations was this:— Mr. Hesketh had another subject to discuss with his relatives, besides the removal of his daughter from Wykeham. His medical skill had recently been instrumental in restoring to health an old and valued friend, who had not only reaped the benefit of his advice as doctor, but of his unremitting attention as nurse.

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In return, Mr. Grainger would have done anything in his power to show his gratitude, but he was puzzled to know what could give the doctor most pleasure. One day, however, Mr. Hesketh happened to mention his nephews at Wykeham, and Mr. Grainger saw that his opportunity was come. "Can you not send me one of them?" he said. "I would take him as if he were a son of your own, without premium; and it would be at least a start in life."

Now, Mr. Grainger was a civil engineer, of some reputation, and Mr. Hesketh knew well that a boy could hardly have a more successful beginning than as his pupil; he had always promised to try to advance the interest of his godson Alick, and this seemed a better chance of helping him than could have been anticipated; so, thanking Mr. Grainger cordially for his kind offer, he agreed to mention it at Wykeham, with little doubt but that Alick would gladly avail himself of it, as soon as he was old enough to leave school.

Mr. and Mrs. Medwin were both pleased with the idea. It was a great relief, where ways and means were so often causes for anxiety, to think that one son would be fairly started in life with so little expense, and under the guidance of a good as well as a clever man.

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Nigel had not been excluded from the family conference, though he had borne no part in it. Once his uncle, turning to him, asked if it were settled that he was to be brought up to his father's business. Nigel answered quietly in the affirmative, and shortly after slipped out of the room, his father remarking, when he discovered the boy's absence, "that he was glad to see Nigel had made up his mind to do the right thing at last."

Alick's quiet grave face responded but coldly to his uncle's warm, genial manner, as Mr. Hesketh unfolded to him in detail the plan we have mentioned; and, though he endeavoured to express his thanks, they were certainly not hearty.

Mr. Hesketh was disappointed; he had noted on the preceding evening how Nigel's countenance had lighted up while the matter was under discussion, and Alick's apathy seemed to him unaccountable. He attributed it, however, to a boy's awkwardness in expressing his real feelings; and, proceeding in rather a more business-like tone, he said, "Do your natural tastes incline you that way, Alick? Are you anything of a draughtsman, or a mechanician?"

With the same quiet air Alick produced a portfolio, chose from it some plans and architectural

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drawings neatly executed, and handed them to his uncle.

"Very well done, indeed," said Mr. Hesketh; "these will be in your favour, my boy; I will take them back to town with me, and show them to Mr. Grainger."

"They are Nigel's doing, they are not mine," said Alick, rather confusedly.

"Nigel's!" repeated his uncle, astonished. "What is the use of showing me Nigel's productions? I want to see yours."

"Uncle," said Alick, earnestly, "would Mr. Grainger take Nigel instead of me? He would make a better civil engineer than I should; he would not mind the hard, rough work, and he is clever at anything of that kind. I am sure, if Mr. Grainger knew us both, he would choose Nigel."

"I never thought of Nigel," said Mr. Hesketh, slowly. "What does all this mean, Alick? do you really dislike the profession? Let me tell you, it would be throwing a very good chance away, if you let this slip through your fingers."

"It would so exactly suit Nigel," continued Alick, leaving his uncle's question unanswered: "Uncle, do persuade Papa to let him go to Mr. Grainger."

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"You know very well, Alick, that your father intends Nigel to be a stationer. One of the sons must take the business, and perhaps it is as well that it should be the eldest."

"I wish you would ask Papa to let me do that, and then Nigel might be a civil engineer," persisted Alick.

"Do you really mean that you do not care to accept Mr. Grainger's offer?"

"I know there is a great deal of disagreeable work connected with engineering," said Alick, evasively; "Nigel would not mind plunging about, up to his knees in mud, taking a survey of the country for a line of railway."

Mr. Hesketh was amused at the boy's coolness.

"And you would prefer sticking in the mud at Wykeham, instead of plunging about in it elsewhere?" he said.

Alick laughed—"You are not angry with me, Uncle, I hope. I do not mean to be ungrateful; but, really, Nigel would do you far more credit with Mr. Grainger than I should."

"Then you mean me to understand that you reject my offer," said Mr. Hesketh, a little stiffly.

"If you will have Nigel instead of me," began Alick; but his uncle interrupted him,—

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"That has nothing to do with it, Alick—either you accept Mr. Grainger's proposition, or you decline it; which is it to be?"

Alick crimsoned up to his eyebrows, then he looked steadily in Mr. Hesketh's face, saying,—

"Uncle, you mean to be very kind, but really you are not treating me fairly; you force me to tell you what would have been better kept a secret. Nigel would never be happy as a bookseller, though he would not dispute Papa's wish. There is no reason why I should not take his place, if only he may take mine; he is such a good fellow, Uncle; do stand his friend."

Mr. Hesketh smiled—"You plead earnestly, Alick. Well, if your father and mother agree, so will I."

"I thank you, Uncle; I am very glad. You can tell Nigel that you saw his drawings and liked them; it is not worth while saying anything about me."

"I understand," said Mr. Hesketh; "you do not wish him to feel indebted to his brother's generosity."

"He need not; he would do as much for me any day," said Alick, stoutly.

There ended the conference between uncle and

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nephew. There were further discussions between Mr. Hesketh, and Mr. and Mrs. Medwin, and then, when they found that Alick was firm in his purpose, Nigel was told that, after due consideration, it seemed better to transfer Mr. Grainger's offer to him. Had Nigel suspected that Alick was making a sacrifice, he would never have allowed himself to be made his substitute; but all attempts to discover Alick's real wishes seemed useless.

"If you do not care about it, Nigel, perhaps Harry or Donald may," he said; "I do not imagine that civil engineering is the height of bliss."

"I don't know," confessed Nigel; "I believe I should like it above everything."

"That is a comfort," said Alick; "there is certainly no accounting for tastes."

"Do you really mean that you wish to stay at home?" said Nigel.

"Yes, only don't tease me about it any more; if I have been asked that question once, I should think I have heard it twenty times from Uncle Hesketh, Papa, Mamma, Maggie, or some one; no one seems to understand the value of peace and quietness."

Alick's tone was irritable, and Nigel forbore to press the matter further; he could only muse on

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his own good fortune, and the rest of the family reflected the delight that shone in his bright merry face. Alick, too, was happy, though with him there was less demonstration of it than with Nigel. He had voluntarily chosen for himself the lowest place, and, strange to say, it began to possess for him great attractions. He could not help wondering sometimes why everything wore for him such a much brighter aspect than in the days of old, when his own gratification and self-interest were all he cared for.

So the weeks wore on towards the point which brings the simple story of an unbroken family circle to a close. It was arranged that Florence and Nigel should leave Wykeham together—the one to start for her pleasant summer trip up the Rhine, the other to take his place in the battle of life, to realize the responsibilities and duties of coming manhood.

You who have an especially dear brother or sister will understand what the pang of parting was to Margaret. Very keenly she felt it, yet she bore it bravely and patiently, taking comfort in the performance of her duties as eldest sister, lightening her own trouble by sharing the joys and sorrows

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of those around her. The last year had done much for Margaret. Nigel's influence had been made the instrument of good to her. Now she was learning another lesson. All her love for her brother could not prevent her from being separated from him. She must trust him in God's hands. Was not that the surest way of fulfilling the command,—"Little children, keep yourselves from idols"? Alick and she, too, learnt to know each other then, and Margaret found that in her heart of hearts she had room for more than one brother.

I cannot now tell of Nigel's success in London, or the result of Florence's schemes for happiness. Poor Florence! whose many attractive ways and pleasing qualities served but as temptations to her, because she lacked the right principle within—because as yet she had no better motive in life than self-gratification.

My story has been but a picture of home life; and now that the young birds are about to quit the nest, we too must take our leave of them. A happy nest it was—warm with the loving care of father and mother; bright with the sunshine of the fresh young hearts that glowed within. Years

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after, when the boys had made out a way for themselves, and the girls had other homes of their own, they treasured fondly the memory of that quaint old house in the High Street, where they had joyed and sorrowed together, before partings were known amongst

THE MEDWINS OF WYKEHAM.

THE END.

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